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Weird Tales

APR.

THE RULER OF FATE

. . . utterly strange and uncanny is this fascinating weird thriller!

By JACK WILLIAMSON

Carl Jacobi
Robert Bloch
Arlton Eadie
August W. Derleth

25c

APRIL, 1936

WEIRD TALES

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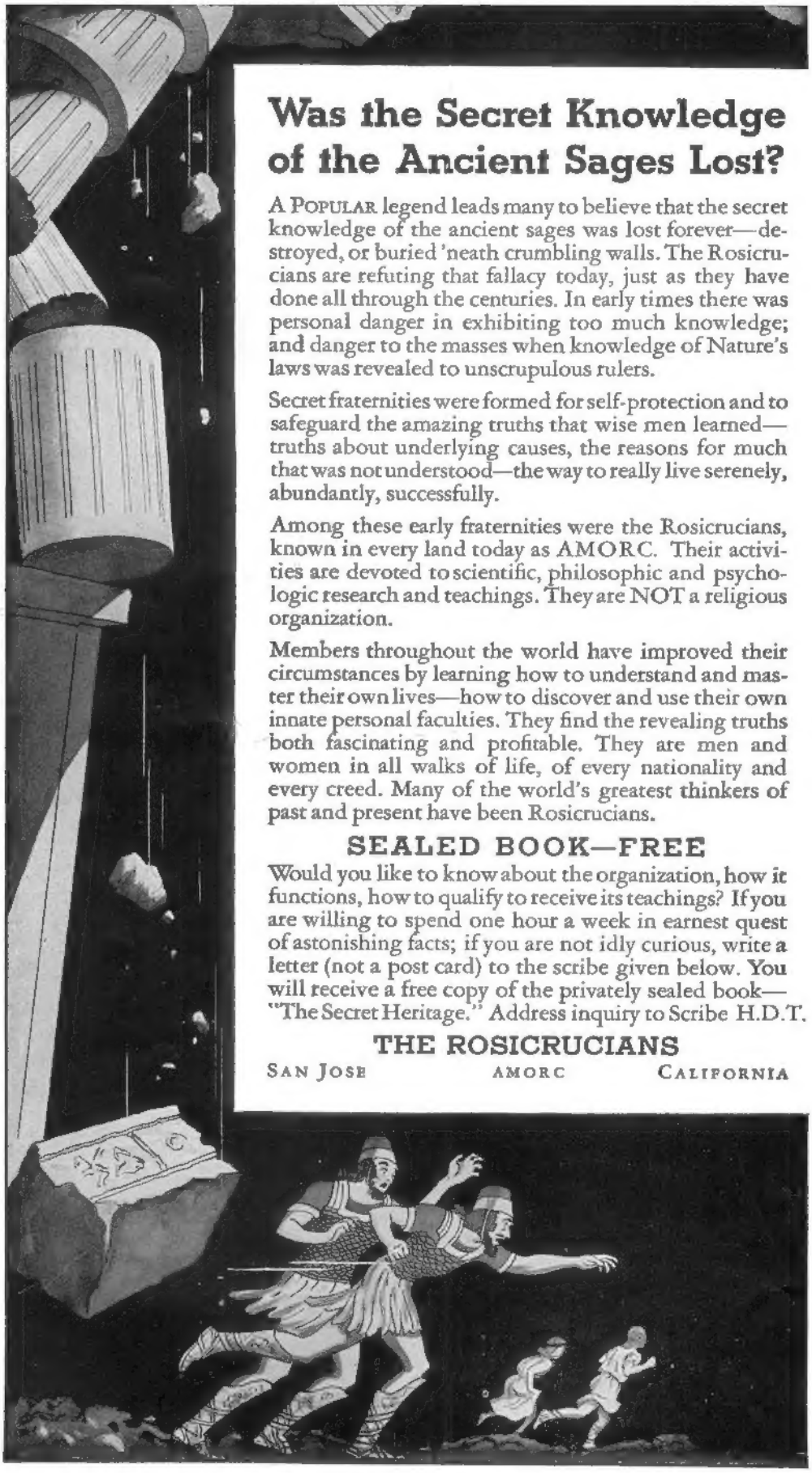

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Ruler of Fate

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A thrilling, fascinating, thought-provoking tale of romance and a weird creature that rules our Earth from a cavern of horror on the Moon

1. To Avert a War

"H'LO, kid."

The warm, quiet greeting came out of the dark beyond the opening door, suddenly. The girl, sitting in the pool of light in the middle of the big room, had not heard the door. She was startled. Her wide-browed face drained white, and one hand clutched at her throat.

Shiela Hall was tall for a girl, and she sat very straight in the swivel chair behind the battered desk. Usually Shiela appeared the very efficient secretary for the Montel Foundation that she was. Beyond her trim, secretarial efficiency, however, welled up eternal surprize.

Her waved hair was commonly a pale, tawny brown—until some trick of light unveiled glories of unsuspected gold. Her eyes were usually brown, level eyes, honestly quizzical—until quick emotion flooded them with purple. She was ordinarily composed, serene—yet sudden feeling could, as it had now, bleach her skin to an unflawed, telltale transparency.

Kane Montel came through the door, into the large, bare office. A hastily walled-off corner of a larger interior, it had never been finished. The floor was bare concrete, the walls sheet metal and fiber-board. The ceiling was crossed with dusty girders.

Kane Montel was a slim-waisted, big-chested giant. He stood six-feet-two, weighed two-twenty. He was limping a little, now, upon one bandaged foot. One big arm hung in a white sling. His square jaw was crossed with plaster. Keen gray eyes smiled beneath the bandage around his forehead. The hair above it was black.

He came from the door to the big desk. He sat down on the corner of it, to swing his injured foot clear of the floor. Under the bandage, his gray eyes looked warmly down at Shiela Hall.

She was still staring up at him, with the purple in her eyes. One white hand was still pressed to her throat, and the other, on the desk, was convulsively crushing a sheet of paper. But she was beginning to smile, faintly, and a slow pink was coming into her blanched skin.

"Matter, kid?" Concern spoke through the lightness of Kane's tone. "Look as if the skeleton in chains had walked in on you. Shouldn't be here so late, kid—you work too hard."

She swallowed, and the hand came away from the white column of her throat. The brilliance of a sudden smile transfigured her face, and she breathed, softly:

"Oh, Monty!"

Kane Montel bent a little toward her, over the telephone on the desk, his gray eyes drinking in her loveliness.

"Most amazing kid, Shiela," he whispered. "Always pretty. But sometimes, just a moment, you're so perfectly, blindingly beautiful that it hurts. Tell me—what scared you?"

"Thank you, Monty."

"Yes, they've got us!" muttered Kane.

Her wide eyes were looking up at him, steadily, candidly, still purple.

"Somehow, Monty," she said slowly, "the sound of your voice made—this afternoon—all come back." Her voice fell to a shaken whisper. "Somehow, just for a moment, I was back there at the edge of the field. I saw the flyer rise again.

"For a moment, then, I was so glad, Monty—even if I was afraid for you. As the flyer lifted, I could read her name—*Spirit of Man*. It made me proud and happy, for a moment, because I was a human being, and because you were on the flyer, going out to the moon.

"And then that horrible, horrible instant! Shining in the sun, the flyer had come up like a bright, living thing. And suddenly it was dead. It tilted a little, and fell.

"There was a dreadful, hanging silence as it came down, and then the terrible grinding crash when it struck the field. My feet felt the shock of it. And that was about all I did feel, for hours. I thought you were—were—dead, Monty.

"Somehow, your voice made it all come back."

"Just luck I'm not. Or I'm such a big brute you can't kill me." His lean face

twisted grimly. "Others are, who had more right to live than I do. Harper—and Benning."

"Farris?" she asked, mechanically.

"Hospital," he said. "Nine bones broken. Punctured lung. Docs won't say.

"But, kid, what are you doing at the shop at midnight? Think you are a robot secretary, or something? Hadn't realized what a shock the—we must have given you. Ought to be home in bed, kid."

"I WAS waiting for someone," she said. "An important visitor."

"Who——"

"The phone rang this afternoon, just before the ambulance came. It was Mr. Grenfell."

"The senator?" His gray eyes narrowed with surprize. "Thought he was in Washington, staving off the dogs of war."

"He was. He's coming down from Washington tonight, by plane. It's about the moon flight. You have to go, he says."

"Have to, maybe," muttered Kane. "I used to think that. But luck says not." He bit his lip. "Must be important, if Grenfell's coming himself, by air. Old friend of Dad's. But I haven't seen him for years."

He looked at Shiela.

"Why didn't you let me in on it? Haven't I anything to do with the Montel Foundation? Or is a flying visit from Grenfell just routine?—Grenfell being just now a bigger statesman than the President."

"You were in the hospital, Monty—for a week, the surgeon told me." Her wide eyes, golden again, were deep with reproof. "You shouldn't be here tonight, Monty."

"Oh, nothing the matter with me." He shrugged unconcernedly, and tried to conceal a wince. "No bones broken, anyhow—unless in the foot—a few strains and bruises and a cut or two——"

Under the bandages, his lean face twisted grimly.

"Nothing much," he muttered. "When I think of Harper and Benning and Farris—I was the leader; it should have been me, under that motor, instead of poor Harper——"

"Oh, Monty, don't say that!" the girl pleaded, deeply agitated. "I couldn't have endured living, if you had been killed——"

"Sorry, kid," he said quickly. "Shouldn't talk that way. But after all, what's left for me to do?"

"Plenty," she told him, earnestly. "You've as fine a body as ever grew—when you get well—and the brain to match. You're just twenty-seven, Monty. You have ability to do a great deal, and the world needs you to do it.

"Why," she reminded him, "the biggest man in America is coming here tonight, to give you a job."

"A job that can't be done," he murmured, gloomily. "Shiela," he said grimly, "I've been trying for seven years to get off on the moon flight. Can't be done. Luck's against me. Circumstance. Always some little thing, something we couldn't foresee—such as that flawed control gear, today."

"Next time——" she began, hopefully.

Kane Montel shook his bandaged head.

"Next time won't come," he sighed, wearily. "Thought I would find some way, when I started back here from the hospital tonight. There's none. Light in the head, I suppose.

"Flyer wrecked. Harper and Benning and Farris all out of the running. Money all gone. The Foundation's last cent went for oxygen, yesterday." Abruptly he asked: "How long since you've drawn your salary, Shiela?"

"My salary doesn't matter," she said. "I wanted you to succeed."

"Thanks," he said. "Nice play I made. You've no business being generous to a Foundation, kid. You'll get your pay, though, if we have to sell the impulse-flyer for junk metal——"

"Junk metal, do I hear?"

The crisp, low voice spoke from the open doorway.

"Nothing of the kind, Montel! The Bull-Montel impulse-flyer must make a successful flight to the moon. You must carry on, Montel. It is necessary—vital!"

They turned to look at the man who had come into the light.

SENATOR Martin Grenfell was a small man, slender, very erect. Grave and reserved of manner, he was yet pervaded with a singular aliveness. He was never still. Arms, shoulders, head moved in continual support of his swift speech. He rarely sat down, never stood completely still.

He gave, however, no impression of abruptness or unease. His whole body, rather, was integrated with his quick, cultured voice, his small-featured, mobile face, in one organ of expression. His face was oddly fluid, mobile, expressive of as many emotional overtones as his voice. His eyes were a kindly blue, twinkling, sympathetic; wide with the generous innocence of a child's eyes, yet somehow wise with the wiles of international diplomacy.

"Montel," he said, "I've come tonight from Washington to tell you that the moon flight must be carried out at once —at any cost. A crisis is upon us. Your success is the only hope that I can see, for America and the world."

Speaking, he had come to the big, scarred desk. He stood beside it, with the tips of his small, sensitive fingers resting on its battered top. His quick blue eyes looked keenly down at Shiela Hall, sitting before a mass of papers; and then across at Kane Montel, resting wearily on the corner of the desk, with his hurt foot swung off the floor.

"We tried, today," Kane told him, his voice low with hopelessness. "Last time. Flyer smashed. Money all gone—not enough left to pay Shiela's salary. Harper and Benning killed; Farris crushed. No —last chance is gone."

"The thing has to be done," said Grenfell. His eyes went briefly up to the dusty girders high above. "What has been your trouble, Montel? Your father once told me that your success was certain."

"It looked so," said Kane, bitterly. "If any big thing had stopped us—any scientific difficulty—it wouldn't be so hard to take. All our troubles have come from small things, accidents, freaks of bad luck. This afternoon, a flawed gear that somehow got past the X-ray tests."

"Then you still consider the flight feasible?"

"It is," said Kane, promptly, "if luck would give us a break. The impulse wheel is a success. You know the principle: equal action and reaction between slung weights in the wheel. The momentum of one is transmitted by springs as a forward impulse to the ship. The momentum of the other—the reaction—is converted into heat of impact, in the multiple hammers.

"The reaction, you might put it, is diverted into the fourth dimension of heat, and gives us the first contained drive in history. We don't need a boat's reaction against a resisting medium, nor a rocket's waste of material, for reaction.

"And Dad's iron-vapor disruption tube gives us power for the wheel. A few pounds of iron ribbon would supply electricity to take us out to the moon and back, if," he finished bitterly, "fate would let us go."

"You have to go, Montel," said the little statesman, gravely. "For America's sake—for humanity's."

"Why?" Kane asked him, puzzled.

A bitter weariness descended suddenly upon Martin Grenfell. The quick vitality seemed to flow out of his small body. His blue eyes were clouded with despair. His small face drooped hopelessly.

"War," he sighed.

Leaning listlessly on the edge of the big desk, he looked abruptly old to Kane, exhausted, useless. But his limpid, restless eyes, lighting upon Shiela's face, seemed to find there the seed of strength.

DRAWING his shoulders square, with grim determination, Martin Grenfell said:

"War is upon us, Montel. No nation has any reason to fight, really. Even the individuals who hope to profit by it should know that war has become too monstrous to be profitable. Even the munitions-makers should be able to see the collapse and the ruin and the famine ahead—death for them, with the rest of us.

"But war is in the air, Montel. It is a kind of madness. It won't let a nation —or a man—stop to be reasonable. It is a kind of emotional poison, that drives mankind to mass-murder.

"No man or group of men is completely to blame—though the munitions firms are piling fuel on the fire, with their usual propagandizing skill. As you say about the failure of your flight, it has been fate—trivial circumstance.

"Yesterday, for instance, an oil line burst. A transport plane went down into the Baltic, flaming. It carried a poet, a national hero, to death. And today one people is accusing another people of murder, and clamoring for revenge. A jingoistic press, subsidized by the munitions interests, is screaming that a secret heat-ray brought down the plane."

He shook his small head, glumly.

"I don't know where it will stop, short of a world in flame." Martin Grenfell was silent a moment, his blue eyes resting gravely upon the bulk of Kane Montel. "But you can do more to stop it, Montel, than any other man living."

"By planting my bones on the moon, you mean?" asked Kane, puzzled. "I don't see how that——"

"It's no material necessity driving us to war, Montel. It's a psychological complex—the emotional accumulation from a hundred such circumstances as that broken oil line. It is a kind of temporary insanity, fostered by men who blindly hope to make money out of war.

"Your success, Montel, is the one way that I can see to break that complex. Through the past seven years, all the world has been eagerly following your attempts, sharing in them. All the world feels kindly toward you, because of your father. Cheap atomic power has done a great deal for mankind, and it could do a thousand times as much, in a peaceful world.

"Go out to the moon, Montel." His voice was ringing, now. "Mankind will follow you, with a sense of common effort, of common victory. All mankind will be greater, because one man has crossed space, to conquer another planet. The public attention will be lifted above the confusion of narrow hates and blind fears that hold it now. By the time you return, Montel, the war psychosis will have been forgotten."

Kane looked at him heavily, with no light in his gray eyes. He began to speak, in a slow, lifeless tone.

"Seven years ago, it looked easy," he said. "Harry Bull had worked out the impulse principle, decades ago. I had designed the wheel. We had Dad's tubes,

for atomic power. The impulse flyer was a fact. Space was already conquered—on paper.

"We had plenty of money. Dad left his whole fortune to the Foundation, you know, for the conquest of space. The royalties from his tube were still coming in. Millions of dollars a year.

"All changed, now," he muttered. "Failures cost money. Patents expired, royalties stopped. Corporation taxes and the recent capital levies have eaten up our resources. This afternoon, Senator, we came to the end of the rope."

"Montel," said Martin Grenfell, his urgent voice low, tense with electric energy, "you don't know what war will mean. Let me tell you what one of our observers—if you will, spies—reported to Washington not a week ago.

"The scientists of one foreign power have worked out a new application of the Montel equations—of the equations from which your father developed his tube. Your father gave mankind the greatest gift of science: power unlimited. And these men, potential enemies of our nation, have made it a power of destruction.

"These new atomic bombs will desolate a country, a continent, a planet—hideously, and for ever. The process is slow. It is a gradual disruption of the iron atoms in the soil. It follows the same principles as the break-down of atoms of iron vapor in your father's tube. But, once started, it cannot be controlled or stopped. And the emitted radiation will destroy all life in the area affected.

"Think what that means, Montel! If war comes, those bombs will be rained upon America. It will be transformed for ever into a desert of terrible, destroying dust.

"And our laboratories are working furiously, now, to develop the same agency for use against the possible enemy—the madness of war is as terrible in America as anywhere else.

"Let me tell you, Montel."

A terrible, desperate earnestness pleaded in Martin Grenfell's voice.

"War will certainly mean the collapse of civilization. Quite possibly, it may mean the end of humanity."

For a little time he was silent, while his eyes traveled back to the dusty girders above.

"It is a kind of dreadful jest," he said, somberly. "We have come to the threshold of a new age. Modern technology, with its climax in your father's discovery, has made it possible for man to step out of the snarling, struggling animal, into real humanity.

"I have dreamed of a time, Montel—and fought for it—when there should be a universal happiness such as the world has never known. Your father was my friend, Montel. We had the same ideals, we struggled toward the same goal. And now it seems that the Montel equations are to be the means of utter ruin, annihilation.

"Unless," he finished, "you go out to the moon, Montel."

Kane Montel's big shoulders twitched, beneath the whiteness of the sling. Brightness of sudden tears glittered in his gray eyes. His lean, square-jawed face was abruptly twisted, gaunt and terrible with pain. He gulped noisily, and whispered:

"If it can be done——"

Then the telephone whirred beside him on the desk, and Shiela reached mechanically to pick it up.

Gripping the instrument hard, her white hand began to tremble. Kane saw the color flowing away from her loveliness. Listening, twice she said yes. Without having spoken again, she set the telephone back on its stand.

Her wide eyes looked up at Kane, with purple shadow coming into them.

Kane asked, "What is it, kid?"

She started a little, and said, in a dull, weary voice:

"That was the secretary to the chief of staff of the American army. He called to notify us that the President of the United States is just issuing an executive order, forbidding the flight to the moon. The impulse flyer is being commandeered, under the National Safety Act, for military use.

"Army officers, he said, and engineers from the Bureau of Standards, will be here at Maple Hill in two days, to take possession of the flyer, together with all the records and equipment of the Foundation.

"You are to stay on, Monty, to help develop the impulse flyer as a fighting arm, a bombing machine."

2. *"Red Ruin . . . upon Us!"*

"Two days."

Kane's voice broke the grim, long silence that followed Shiela's words.

Martin Grenfell swung toward him quickly, across the big desk, with eager approval lighting his small, expressive face.

"Then you'll go?"

"I'll try it," said Kane, simply. "If luck will give me half a break——" His big hand rubbed the cross of white plaster on his jaw. "I'm not superstitious," he said, "not in theory, anyhow. But I can't help feeling, somehow, a malicious purpose in our failures. Fate is jesting with us, always moving to defeat us. Sometimes I'm ready to quit. But I'll try."

He looked down at Shiela's silent loveliness, and his gray eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. He flung up his bandaged head, and swallowed, and said to Martin Grenfell, in a loud, hoarse voice:

"Two days—not long; can't waste time. Must have three things: money, equipment, men. Foundation has come to the wall."

He was looking at Shiela again, and she said:

"I've just been going through our balance sheets. There's not an asset left; not one item that we could sell or offer for security—except the flyer itself."

Martin Grenfell spoke up softly.

"My own personal fortune is at your disposal," he said. "It isn't large—I've given my life for other things than money. I could rake up perhaps twenty thousand."

"Thank you," said Kane, soberly. "Might be enough. But a lot of expensive instruments are smashed—have to be replaced.

"As for the equipment, I'll go down to the wreck, tonight. Check over the damage. Instruments. The snapped control gear. Motors torn loose from their brackets—one of them got Harper. Tube batteries smashed, dead.

"Hull's well built. Can be repaired—test it for leaks with compressed air. Landing-gear wrecked, when we cracked up. Have to raise the hull, rebuild it.

"Tonight I'll find what we must have. Get off orders for the instruments and parts. Get a crew to clearing up the wreckage."

Shiela was protesting, with concern on her face:

"Monty, you mustn't! You ought to be in the hospital this minute."

"Got to carry on," he said, grimly. "Now or never. Few caffine tablets will keep me going." He tried to grin. "By the way, kid," he said, "call up the War Department. Tell them we wrecked the flyer today. Tell them we're beginning repairs at once. Considerable undertak-

ing, tell them, and their experts needn't hurry.

"Needn't say what we think of the President's command."

She nodded.

"And that," Kane told Martin Grenfell, "brings us to the third item: men. A problem. Four is a full crew; two can handle the flyer. But I don't know a single man to get, on short notice. Takes training. Sane man wouldn't go," he finished bitterly, "when he saw the list of those I've killed."

Martin Grenfell hesitated, doubtful.

"I myself should volunteer," he said slowly. "But I'm not an engineer. And I dare not be away from Washington too long——"

Shiela Hall was rising slowly out of her chair. Her fair skin had drained again to milky white. Her eyes were expanding to purple pools, and she was breathing swiftly. Speaking with difficulty, in a low, strained voice, she said:

"Monty—I'm—I'm going with you."

"Shiela!" His voice was astonished. "Mustn't think of that, though it's mighty good of you." He bent toward her, earnestly. "No picnic, kid. Rocketing off in a machine already wrecked. Just half a crew. No time for tests or complete preparations. Suicide!"

"I'm going, Monty," she repeated.

"Can't let you, kid," he protested, desperately. "You might be—like Harper——" He choked and swallowed. "Nobody knows what's going to happen."

Wide and purple, her eyes stared up at him, out of the whiteness of her face. Her hands, resting on the desk, were quivering. Her voice trembled.

"That's why I'm going, Monty," she said. "I didn't realize, until the ship fell, this afternoon. I couldn't bear to go on living, Monty, after you were dead or gone. Don't you see, Monty?"

He was staring at her, and yet seemed not to see her white loveliness. His gray eyes were blank with a kind of fascination. His lean face had become a stiff mask. His upper lip was twitching.

"You know I can do the work, Monty," she insisted, earnestly, when he failed to speak. "I helped with the drawings, and watched you in the shop, and kept the lists and inventories. I know more about the flyer than anybody besides you. And I have to go, Monty. Don't you see? To stay would kill me."

A tear started down his lean cheek. He ignored it. His face broke slowly into an odd, stiff smile. He tried to speak, and swallowed, and said:

"Of course, kid. I understand. I feel the same way. We'll try it—together."

His big hand reached across the desk, and touched her arm.

The telephone whirred again.

"We'll go down to the flyer, right away," Kane told Grenfell. "See what must be done."

Shiela had picked up the telephone.

"A call for you, Mr. Grenfell," she said, and handed him the instrument.

"Yes, Higgins, Grenfell speaking."

The little statesman listened silently, with increasing agitation upon his small face.

"My secretary," he said, in a slow, abstracted tone, replacing the instrument. "I must hurry back to Washington." His thin, nervous fingers were tracing the lapels of his coat. "Sometimes, Montel," he said, "I feel that I'm the only sane man left in the world.

"The message," he explained, "was guarded. But I understand that the President himself suggested in conference today the advantage of a surprize attack, to anticipate our enemies with the atomic bombs.

"The world is mad, Montel. Red ruin is upon us. I'm alone, in Washington.

But I'll try to hold the war off, long enough to give you a chance——"

3. The Dwellers on the Moon

At sunset on the second day following, the *Spirit of Man* still lay where it had fallen, on the testing-field of the Montel Foundation, at Maple Hill. It was now supported, however, upon a hastily erected scaffold, and the landing-skids had been repaired under it.

The bright steel hull of the impulse flyer, washed now with sunset crimson, was spindle-shaped, tapering, somewhat less than seventy feet long. The big, enclosed disk of the impulse wheel, projecting above the hull, made a hump on the middle of its back. Entry to the double hull was through a small air-lock, set in the level deck forward of the hump.

Men were busy, within the hull: technicians testing the newly installed batteries of Montel tubes, located in the tail; electricians completing the connections to the six big motors mounted on either side of the impulse wheel, geared to it; men with acetylene torches repairing an air-leak, where the hull had been strained in falling.

Kane Montel was in the control room in the flyer's nose, just forward of the narrow, compact living-quarters. His lean face was a little haggard, a few bandages were still on his big body. He was trying and adjusting the new navigation instruments, as Shiela unpacked them carefully.

Slim and boyish in white coveralls, her pale, tawny hair held close to her head with a little white cap, Shiela was silently efficient. Her golden eyes were happy. Once she told Kane, softly:

"I'm glad I'm going with you, Monty. Whether we get back safely, or not—I'm glad."

He paused a moment, and caught up her hand, tenderly.

Alertly, she kept peering up through the small, thick lenses of the observation ports.

"A plane, Monty!" she called, suddenly tense. "A big tri-motor, with the army insignia."

Kane raised his eye from the ocular of a new heliocentric theodolite.

"Our military friends," he announced, looking at the big plane wheeling down toward the testing-field, "with their scientists from the Bureau of Standards, to take possession."

He stood silently for a moment, his gray eyes resting on Shiela's trim white figure.

"Well, kid," he said, "this is the word to go."

She moved a little toward him. Her breath quickened. A little wave of color came into her face, and it was illuminated with a smile.

"I'm glad," she whispered.

They gripped hands a moment, solemnly.

Then Kane's lean face broke into a grin.

"So am I," he said. "But we're crazy, kid! I'll have to run the men out, now, and seal the air-lock. Just have to hope that the hull is patched so our air won't be gone before we get out of the stratosphere, and that the new batteries are wired so they won't burn up the motors."

He laughed suddenly, almost harshly.

"Fools," he muttered. "We're fools to tackle it. Always before, we've tested every part of every instrument, spent months, checking every detail and failed! What will happen to us now?—trying to get off in a wreck just half repaired!"

"But we're going to try," said Shiela, serenely.

"Yes, we have to try," he said grimly. "Code wire from Grenfell, this afternoon. War clouds blacker. President has ordered a secret mobilization of the air

force. But if we don't move, these officers will have us mobilized, too."

He turned aft.

Shiela followed him out of the control room, saying:

"I'll be warming the batteries."

The military plane came down on the field and taxied to a halt a hundred yards below the *Spirit of Man*. Men in uniform tumbled out. An officer, seeing the closing air-lock of the impulse flyer, seeing the men standing away from it, emitted an angry shout.

With uniformed men streaming along behind him, he lunged toward the flyer, waving an automatic.

Dropping down the companion ladder beneath the air-lock, Kane ran back into the little control room.

"Ready, kid?" he called into a telephone.

"Aye, Captain," came Shiela's cheerful reply. "Tubes hot, sir, ready at full potential. All motors set for starting. Wheel clear, brakes disengaged, axis of lift at ninety degrees. All ready, sir."

"Thanks, kid."

Kane's big fingers brought down a series of levers.

Baffled rage twisted the countenance of the running officer. His black military mustache quivered angrily. His mouth flew wide as he bawled unheard orders.

The high-pitched whine of racing motors filled the *Spirit of Man*. Her bright hull quivered to the beat of the accelerating impulse wheel. It trembled to the swiftening impacts of the leaden surfaces of the multiple hammers, that diverted reaction into heat.

The long, humped spindle of her hull stirred upon the scaffolding. It lifted clear. With increasing, amazing velocity, it drove upward into the blue abyss of the evening sky. A bewildered military man stared up at it, cursing fervently, waving a futile pistol.

The sun, which had set beyond the village, came up again, red above the shadows of the wooded hills. Its redness fell away like a veil as the flyer drove upward. Its naked face was left, a supernal blue-white disk in a sky of utter blackness. It was pitilessly bright, peering between the delicate wings of its corona.

But Kane Montel, in the control room, shaken with unbelieving elation, was watching not the sun but the moon. The full white face of it had come up out of the hills, opposite the sun. It grew ever brighter, and the star-dusted sky behind it blacker. It seemed to shrink a little, yet every marking upon it became harshly, blindingly clear.

A cruelty was in the grim, rugged nakedness of its wild craters; somber mystery shadowed its "seas". The white net of Tycho's rays became a puzzling, sinister web. The moon looked down upon him with a pitiless face of blinding enigma and ominous promise.

And Kane, for all his incredulous elation at the successful start, was suddenly afraid.

"Well, kid, we're off," he told Shiela, two hours later, when she came for a little while into the control room. "Funny that nothing should go wrong — when everything should. Luck is having another joke at our expense."

"You're developing a kind of complex about luck, aren't you, Monty?" Shiela asked him, soberly. "I thought you didn't believe in any—well, supernatural interference with human affairs."

"I don't; at least I shouldn't," Kane told her. "But circumstances have defeated me so many times. Trivial circumstances. The flaw in that gear. A month ago, a drunken driver, who ran down Marston on the day he was going to take off with us. The time before,

some factory mistake in assembling the multiple hammers, so that the wheel shook itself to pieces.

"But you know the sort of thing. It's always some small, unpredictable accident that stops us. I can't help feeling a purpose behind it—grim, malicious, jesting." He laughed at himself, bitterly. "Foolish idea, I suppose."

He scanned a row of dials.

"Doesn't it look like a joke?" he asked. "Here we are, in a wreck that shouldn't have been able to leave the ground. But the tubes are generating at full potential. Motors running perfectly. Old wheel drumming along smoother than she ever did in a test. Even the hull is holding—we haven't lost an ounce of air.

"No, when fate decides to let us reach the moon, kid, we could make it in a tin can.

"Be there, now, in about seventy hours."

He pointed through a thick quartz lens, and they paused to look about.

Earth, visible in the reflectors, was behind, a vast disk of darkness blotting out the unwinking splendor of the stars. The sun's rays ringed it with supernal radiance, fading outward from a band of deepest scarlet, to fairy wings of delicate opalescence.

All about, in a sky of utter, frosty darkness, burned the still glory of the stars. They did not twinkle. Each shone with a pure, steady light, very tiny, very bright. In color they varied from pale green to violet blue and hot scarlet. Out here, beyond the veil of the atmosphere, their brilliant hordes overwhelmed the familiar constellations. Kane felt half lost amid their brilliant myriads.

The moon flamed ahead of them, a full, mottled disk, cruelly bright against the blackness of space. The perfect circle of Tycho's ringed plain was pitilessly distinct at the center of its spreading net of dazzlingly white rays.

"See the rays of Tycho!" whispered Shiela. "I can trace them across all the moon now."

"I always wondered," muttered Kane. "Greatest mystery of the moon. Straight white streaks, crossing mountains, craters, plains. Cast no shadows. Most prominent at full moon. Strange, how much more distinct they seem. Well, in seventy hours we may know."

A little silence, and Shiela asked:

"What's the program on the moon? We got off in such a rush——"

"Main thing—what Grenfell wants—is just to land, and get back to Earth with proof that we did. Have cameras, instruments for observing physical conditions, heliograph for attempting communication. And that space-armor; go out in that to get rock specimens, and so on.

"Want to land near Tycho. See what those rays really are. Since Dad gave me a telescope, when I was twelve, I've wondered——"

THE *Spirit of Man* drove on toward the moon. The even whine of the motors never faltered; the drumming of the impulse wheel was steady as the beat of a great heart. Standing alternate watches, Kane and Shiela found time for rest. Both felt much recovered from the ordeal of departure.

After three "days," the flyer dropped upon the naked lunar plain, five miles north of the great annular wall of Tycho.

Southward, that crater wall plunged mightily into the star-shot blackness of the sky, abrupt, tremendous, a hostile, overwhelming barrier. Its peaks, in the sun's radiance, were spears of blinding light, thrust from chasms of infinite darkness.

The plain about the flyer blazed with merciless sun. It was scarred with the

queerly black shadows of a million pinnacles, of naked, jagged boulders, of miniature craters. It was cracked, splintered, fused.

"Looks like some weird battlefield," said Shiela, shivering a little with dread at its marks of tremendous cataclysm. "Torn up by a million big guns."

"So it has been," said Kane. "Meteors. No air to shield against them. No erosion to remove their scars."

In the clumsy, heavy fabric of the space suits, they had climbed up through the little air-lock. They stood side by side upon the small deck, forward of the great bulge of the wheel. The quartering sun fell upon them out of a black sky with a dazzling, stinging power. Every surface it touched was a burning, merciless white. And every shadow was night-black, cold, mysterious.

Even behind the tinted lenses of their helmets, their eyes streamed tears from the savage radiation.

"Half blind," muttered Kane. His voice was carried by telephone across a short wire between them. "Let's just stand still until our eyes get adjusted."

"I feel—queer," came Shiela's voice from the receiver against his ear. "Dizzy."

"So'm I," he said. "Light in the head. It's lack of gravity. Get used to it. Awkward walking, but the shoes are weighted. We'll get a few rock specimens. Photographs. Then get over to that ray—just half a mile or so."

They stood silently for a moment, both making little movements, getting the feel of the unfamiliar suits, testing the effects of muscular efforts against lunar gravitation.

SHIELA was peering across that terrible plain at the strange horizon of dead black and eye-searing white, of mountains incredibly wild, cragged and cruel and precipitous beyond imagination.

Then, through the stiff, inflated fabric of his suit, Kane felt the abrupt pressure of her hand against his arm. He heard her voice in the receiver, low with breathless wonderment, trembling with vague apprehension.

"Monty!" she was whispering. "The ray—look at the ray!"

He looked quickly at her and saw that she was pointing with the swollen sleeve of her space suit.

"Something," she whispered. "It's something more than a surface marking."

The tiny, flat plateau where the flyer lay was half a mile eastward of the wide, snow-white ray that Kane had planned to investigate. He turned and looked toward it now. And beyond the tortured, blazing, motionless lunar plain, below the black sweep of the star-drifted sky, he saw a singular thing.

"It's like a wall of light," he whispered, amazed.

Straight out from the titanic buttresses of Tycho's barrier ring, it marched along the cragged horizon. It was a changeless wall of white opalescence, a thrusting arm of milky radiance.

"It's like a real ray, shining out through the crater ring," breathed Shiela, "like a ray of some queer—energy, but it doesn't change. And it shines through mountains."

Standing on the low-railed deck, beside the girl, Kane gazed at it until the pitiless light of the moon-scape blinded him with tears. Burning wonder welled up in him, and he chilled to the touch of a nameless, puzzling dread.

Shading his streaming eyes until he could see again, he looked at Shiela. Within the bulk of her helmet he could glimpse her face. It was white now. Her eyes were wide and purple, fascinated.

"Stranger than I ever dreamed," he said. "Can't get an angle on it." He touched the sleeve of her suit with his.

"May be dangerous," he said. "Somehow—makes me afraid. But I want to investigate. Mind?"

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No," he protested. "Might be somehow—deadly. Wait——"

But the girl was already scrambling down the light accommodation ladder toward the white-lit, pitted plain.

The opalescent, enigmatic wall of the ray was often lost to sight as they struggled across the scarred plain. They moved awkwardly, planting weighted shoes with care, keeping muscular effort to the minimum that prevented spectacular leaps and dangerous falls. At last, assisting each other out of a miniature crater, they found themselves within fifty yards of the ray.

A straight, motionless wall of milky light, it burned high against the blackness of space. Its strange radiance hid the stars. Its edges seemed oddly sharp, definite—as if it had been a luminous white fluid, poured into invisible walls.

"Queer! Queer!" Kane whispered. "Must be radiation—energy. But what penetration! Drives through the mountain ring of Tycho!"

He led the way forward, across the last intervening yards of level rock.

Shiela stopped him abruptly, clutching his arm.

"Monty, wait!" she cried, with a mute terror in her voice. "Don't go any closer—please! You're—shining!"

Kane held up his gloved hand and saw that violet fire was glowing about the thick fingers. And he saw a violet-green spark leap silently away from his body into the white, ominous barrier of the ray.

"Static potential discharging," he murmured. "Then the thing is real energy. No illusion. Represents power—tremendous power."

Shiela was tugging at his arm.

"Come away, Monty," she pleaded.

"Coming, kid." He followed her. "Kill us, probably, to go closer. But I wonder——"

"Look!" The sharp alarm in her voice cut off his words. "Above the mountains yonder."

Staring into the blackness of the star-shot sky, above the looming, overwhelming, fire-white and night-black ramparts of Tycho, he saw what the girl had seen. Above the highest pinnacles, which bit like white fangs into the black sky, was a moving object.

It was a small globe, silvered. The rays of the sun, burning upon its upper surface, made it look like a little half-moon floating in the ebon sky above the peaks. A small globe—but swiftly growing. It drove past the highest summits and then sank a little, still expanding.

Panic closed its cold iron fingers on Kane's chest.

"A ship!" he muttered. "Some strange ship coming toward our flyer. Fool that I am—leading you off here!"

"Can we get back," Shiela whispered anxiously, "ahead of them?"

"Doubt it."

But they started to return. They tried to run. Their efforts carried them above the surface in grotesque bounds. Again and again they fell, sprawling awkwardly, painfully.

"Dangerous, kid," Kane warned. "If you tore the fabric of the suit——"

The picture of death by suffocation, by internal explosion, as the air in the suit rushed out into the near vacuum of the moon, was so painful that he choked off his voice.

They plunged down into the inky shadow of a depression. The white, humped spindle of the impulse flyer was lost from sight. Leaping ahead, stumbling in the frigid darkness, they watched the bright globe descending amid the stars. It was near now. It looked huge.

It vanished, sinking in the direction of the impulse flyer.

When they had toiled out of the crater and come again within view of the *Spirit of Man,* consternation stopped them. The white bulk of the sphere lay motionless beside the flyer. Its shimmering, riveted mass overwhelmed the little spindle-shaped machine.

"It *is* a ship!" muttered Kane. "What kind of life on the moon——"

"See——" whispered Shiela.

A great valve had opened in the side of the globe. Little figures were tumbling down a ladder. They scattered across the rocky plain. A few approached the impulse flyer. They were diminutive, Kane then realized, by comparison only.

"Men!" he breathed, astounded. "They *are* men. Have on space suits like ours."

"They're trying to catch us," whispered Shiela, voiceless with fear. "Already we're cut off from the flyer. And now they are spreading out to hem us in against the ray."

4. *The Machine of Destiny*

"YES, they've got us," muttered Kane, wearily. "Look how they travel—leaping like kangaroos! If we had that knack, we might get away. But no chance. Outnumbered. No weapon. Not a chance."

He looked at Shiela's helmeted head. He could see a stray wisp of hair, a flame-bathed brown against the whiteness of her brow, and her eyes, wide with apprehension, purple-shadowed.

"I'm a fool, kid," he said bitterly, "to let you come. And then blunder out here with you, to be caught like a rat."

"No, Monty," she said, and her low voice rang with a curious serene strength. "I wanted to come. Remember that. No matter what happens, I'm glad I'm with you.

"And there was no reason to expect hostile life on the moon. No use blaming yourself."

He gripped her thickly gloved hand for a moment, silently.

"I love you so much, kid," he said abruptly. "Why must circumstances always wreck our happiness? On Earth this moon-flight was always a river to cross. And now we're here——"

His eyes went back to the two argent ships, the leaping figures.

"Let's make a break for it!" he urged, desperately. "They're trying to surround us. Can't outrun them, but we might hide in some little crater."

He was tugging at her arm. She resisted quietly.

"It's no use, Monty. You know that. They have the flyer already. If they want us, all they have to do is wait until our oxygen tanks are empty. We may as well surrender.

"Anyhow, they may not intend us any harm."

"Of course," he said. "No reason why they should."

Yet, despite his words, wild fear was leaping in his heart. It came from the wild, cruel malice of the moon's face, from the terrific enigma of the white, blazing ray behind them, and from the swift, well-planned movements of the leaping figures closing in like wolves on helpless prey.

Fear it was, not for himself but for the girl at his side. His mind was fogged with scarlet intuition of danger mounting over her. He felt nerved to any rash attempt that might save her. Yet his reason told him there could be no escape—not now.

"No reason," he repeated.

Grimly he strove to still his dread with the calm of scientific curiosity.

"Anyhow," he said, "we should learn if they are really men, and how life exists on the moon in defiance of all the astron-

omers. And we may learn the how and the why of that flaming ray!"

They moved forward deliberately toward the two dissimilar ships that shimmered upon the white, pitted plain.

The leaping, bulky-suited figures gathered around them as they advanced. Keeping a cautious distance, they menaced Kane and Shiela with long spears and with odd little devices like golden needles. They herded the two toward the ladder that fell from the air-lock of the huge globe. Kane led the way up the ladder and into the air-lock.

The outer valve clanged behind the two, ominously.

Kane and Shiela waited in the bare, cylindrical metal chamber. Air was hissing in about them noisily. The inflated fabric of their suits collapsed slowly as the outside pressure increased.

They were clasping hands.

"Remember, Monty," Shiela whispered once, "I'm glad I came with you."

The hiss of air at last ceased. The massive inner valve opened. A man walked through it toward them.

Gaunt he was, tall, lean of frame, yet erect and powerful. He was all in black: odd, long tunic and high, skin-tight hose of black, lustrous, silken stuff. The hands hanging from his black, tight-sleeved arms were thin talons, corded, powerful.

The hair upon his bare, angular head was long, fine, completely white. His face, long, thin, high of brow, was wrinkled as if with extreme age; yet the skin had the healthy pink of youth. His eyes were dark; they gleamed with quick intelligence; within them lay the shadow of deep and ancient melancholy.

Within the valve he halted, his somber eyes resting upon the two. He bowed a little, gravely, without mockery. He spoke, and his voice came through the fabric of the space-suits distinctly. It was a low, deep voice, measured, deliberate.

"Shiela Hall and Kane Montel," it said, "I convey to you the greetings of my master, Aru, who styles himself Lord of Destiny. And I congratulate you upon your intelligence in yielding without attempting to cause us difficulty.

"You may remove your space-suits now. You need them no longer. Do so and come with me. Many things await you."

AT THAT first somber-toned word, Kane's sense of reality crumbled. His world dissolved bewilderingly into chaotic, conflicting illusion. He was seized again by the helpless bafflement which lately had so often overcome him. Again he felt that he was but a puppet dancing on the strings of a jesting fate.

In dumb silence he waited until the tall man had done speaking; then a dazed, wondering impulse in him framed the question:

"You knew we were coming to the moon?"

Somberly the gaunt man nodded.

"All things on Earth," he stated gravely, "are ordained by my master." Solemnly he repeated his request: "Remove your suits now and follow me within. Much is waiting for you."

Kane was grappling with an incredible possibility. The question burst from him incoherently:

"Our failures—when luck was holding us back—was that——"

"The desires of men," said the man in black, "conflict often with the supreme will of my master."

Kane turned to the silent, motionless fabric that cloaked Shiela beside him.

"I believe him," he muttered. "Thing's impossible. But I do. I've felt a will, a purpose, in fate." His voice sank to the faintest whisper. "Frightens me, kid. Such power. Absolute power to rule men —without their even knowing. And it's

a cruel power, malicious, dreadful. I wish you were safely back——"

"Steady!" her serene whisper came to him. "Remember what I said." Her hand touched his arm. "After all, this is just a man. Probably his master is only another man. Things look mysterious and terrible, but that's probably just because we don't understand.

"Ask him a few things: what his name is — how he knows English — how he knows about us. When we understand——"

Kane turned toward the man in black to meet his grave, measured voice:

"Me, you may call Vethlo. Please remove your space-suits and come with me. You shall soon see how I know your language, your names—how I am aware that you came to the moon because a man named Martin Grenfell was foolish enough to think that your flight would avert a war.

"Come."

Numbed with apprehensive bewilderment, Kane turned to Shiela. Pale, trembling with uncomprehending dread, she had mechanically begun unfastening the catches of her helmet. He assisted her out of the clumsy fabric. Then, in the freedom of her trim white coveralls, she helped him unfasten his own.

And they followed the man in black into the ship's interior.

In a curiously shaped chamber whose curving, fluted walls were illuminated with pallid, flowing lights of violet and green, he made them sit upon a deep, oddly fashioned divan. Seating himself opposite, he waved a thin, powerful hand.

Silent servants in white appeared at once, kneeling to offer crystal goblets of some fragrant purple drink, and deep silver bowls filled with unfamiliar, delicately textured ruddy fruits, and platters of small brown cakes.

"Refresh yourselves," said Vethlo. Seeing Shiela about to decline the purple glass, he suggested gravely: "The drink brings strength, of which you may soon have need."

Kane found his goblet pleasantly stimulating. It revived his courage, cleared a little of the numbed incredulity from his mind. When it was empty, he leaned toward the man in black, asking:

"Just where do we come in? Your master — this Aru — what does he want with us?"

"The Lord of Destiny willed that you should reach the moon," said Vethlo, solemnly, "because he has a deep purpose for you." His dark and ancient eyes rested upon Shiela's white-clad form, full of somber and veiled speculation. He modified: "For one of you."

Whiteness flowed over the girl's fair skin. Her eyes dilated with sudden, shrinking fear, to dark pools of purple. Shuddering a little, she moved instinctively closer to Kane.

Fiercely protective, Kane's big arm went around her trembling shoulders. Savage, helpless rage was touched off in him by the leering significance he read in Vethlo's glance. His voice harsh and rasping with emotion, he demanded:

"What is Aru's purpose—with Shiela?"

Gravely, Vethlo said:

"That will be revealed to you in time."

Muscles trembling in his giant shoulders, Kane pushed himself forward, half out of the seat.

"Do what you please with me," he muttered grimly, "but nobody's going to touch Shiela! That clear? Anybody lays a finger on her—I'll smash him."

No answering resentment touched the long face of the man in black. His grave calm was unruffled. In the same weary voice, heavy with age-long sorrow, he said:

"I beg you to control your emotions,

Kane Montel. You must realize that the will of my master overrules the desires of men. His purpose will be revealed to you.

"First, however, it is my task to convince you of his power. You are now to be allowed to see the instrumentality which directs the destinies of Earth, the machine by whose means my master rules every act of every dweller upon your planet.

"When you have seen what I shall show you, you will know how pitiful, how helpless, are your desires against his will. Perhaps you will then more willingly accept the fate my master has ordained for you."

Leaning forward, Kane whispered breathlessly:

"Who — or what — is this — Lord of Destiny?"

"You shall come before him," said Vethlo. "But first I must demonstrate to you the mechanism of his power."

His dark eyes fell to a panel of small instruments set in the arm of his seat.

"The ship has lifted with us," he said. "We have passed back over the summits of the mountain ring you know as Tycho. We are descending, now, through a shaft, into a space beneath the central peak. In this space is the instrumentality that I must display to you—the machine which rules your world."

"Machine?" echoed Kane, incredulous. "A machine, on the moon, that controls happenings on the Earth?" He laughed at himself with a sound almost harsh. "You had me going," he said. "But a machine that rules fate! It's impossible——"

"A scientist," said Vethlo, gravely, "should be slow to use that word."

He gestured again. Again servitors came silently to offer cakes and fruits and frothing glasses of the purple drink.

"My task of explanation will be simpler," he said, "if I begin by recalling certain instruments which my master has allowed your scientists to devise upon Earth.

"The harmonic analyzer is one of them. It can separate the functions or components of any curve. That means that it can isolate the factors that bring about events.

"The product integraph is another twin instrument which multiplies together any given curves. It combines functions, integrates elements. That means that it can predict the events that will be brought about by certain factors.

"Decades ago your scientists devised crude apparatus of this type to predict the tides on the seas of Earth. The Great Brass Brain, it was called. By the process of harmonic analysis it obtained the value of each harmonic constituent for a given time. The addition of all these constituents gave the tide at that time.

"Your own scientists have since been allowed to go far beyond that crude beginning."

"The weather machines, you mean?" asked Kane.

He was beginning to be absorbed in the quiet voice of the man in black, in spite of the shadow of wonder and apprehension still upon him.

Gravely, Vethlo nodded.

"From predicting the tides to predicting the weather was but a step—though a long one," he said. "The periodic factors involved are much more numerous, much more difficult of analysis. The project, as you know, involved the construction of thousands of automatic relay stations, which automatically observe and report innumerable such factors as solar radiation, barometric pressure, wind movements, humidity, temperature. And if the Great Brass Brain performed integrations beyond the power of the human brain, your new analyzers, synthesizers and in-

tegraphs are a thousand times more complex.

"Weather control," he said, "might be the next step—if my master chose to allow you to undertake it. Certain of the elements with decisive influence upon the weather are comparatively infinitesimal. A few propellers mounted on the towers of your relay stations, to start small currents of air, a few heat bombs to create small changes in temperature — small things mold circumstances."

Vethlo paused. Somberly his sorrowful eyes rested upon Shiela and Kane, dark with some enigmatic speculation. Slowly he sipped from a tall purple glass.

"Yet all that is simple," he said, "childish toys—beside the machine of destiny."

He set down the goblet and looked again at the little dials beside him. Deliberately he rose.

"The ship is at rest," he said. "Come, and you shall see the machine that rules your world."

Icy feet of dread raced again along Kane's spine. And Shiela shrank back into the divan, trembling. Her face was bloodless, her eyes distended with premonitory horror.

"Come," repeated the weary, sorrowful voice of the man in black. "It is my master's will."

And they rose and followed him.

The inexpressibly weird creature known as Aru, and the strange woman known as Athonee, make next month's installment of this story a feast of imaginative writing. Reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Painted Cave

By JULIA BOYNTON GREEN

What artist wrought in this bleak studio—
  Ranging his simple records on the rock,
  The proud horned leader of a mountain flock,
A sun enrayed, a serpent, wheels, a row
Of ripples, sprawled batrachians? Who can know
  All that these weathered symbols meant? A guess
  The experts venture, but stark wilderness
Swallows in mystery the curious show.

Pondering the secrets of this barren land
  We linger. Shadows grow—the desert grays—
  Then—stealing from those lost forgotten days
A nude swart shape beside us seems to stand,
  Loving these ancient tracings of his hand,
Craving it may be some brief word of praise.

The Face in the Wind

By CARL JACOBI

An eery story of a strange frog wall, and the beautiful but evil face—a woman's face—that appeared in the storm one night

TODAY is Tuesday. For more than a week, or since the morning of last Thursday when the dark significance of the strange affair was first publicly realized, my life and the quiet routine of Royalton Manor have been thrown into a miserable state of confusion. It was of course to be expected, all details considered, and I took it upon myself to answer carefully all questions and repeat again and again for each succeeding official the part I played in the prologue to the mystery. Doubtless the London press was justified in referring to the sequence of events as a Royalton Enigma; yet in so doing it aroused a morbid curiosity that has made my position even more bewildering. For the story which I told, and which I know to be true, has been termed impossible and merely the wanderings of a crazed brain.

● Just three years ago, there appeared in this magazine a story entitled "Revelations in Black"—a story that made literary history; for it was something entirely new in vampire stories. Its author, Carl Jacobi, at one stride became one of the most popular of the talented writers who make Weird Tales the undisputed leader in its field. We take pleasure in presenting herewith another story by the same brilliant writer, "The Face in the Wind"—a tale as unusual in its way as was "Revelations in Black." We know that you will enjoy it.

Let me begin by saying that like my fathers before me, I have lived here at Royalton all the days of my life, and I have seen the manor dwindle from an imposing feudal estate to a few tottering buildings and a small plot of weed-choked ground. Time and times have gone hard with the house of Hampstead.

There are, or rather *were* until last Thursday, but two of these buildings occupied. Both in a considerable state of disrepair, I had reserved the right lower wing of the one which in earlier years boasted the name, Cannon Tower, for myself and my books. The other, an ivy-covered cottage, formerly the gardener's quarters, I had given over to an old woman some four months before. Her name was Classilda Haven.

Classilda Haven was a curious individual. A hundred times I have sat at my desk watching her through the open window as she cultivated her patch of vegetables, and I have racked my brain for a reasonable excuse to remove her from my property. The woman, according to her own statement, was nearly eighty; her body was bent and weazened, and her face witch-like and ugly with the mark of age. But it was her eyes that bothered me, drew my gaze every time she came within my vision. They were black, heavily browed, and sharp and clear as a young girl's.

At intervals when I have taken my morning walk through the old grounds, along the ruined frog wall, as I still pre-

"He pushed the hammer to full cock, and leaped back to the window."

fer to call it, and on to the edge of Royalton Heath, I have felt those eyes staring after me. It was imagination, of course; nothing more. There has always been to my mind something grotesque in senility, something repelling in the gradual wasting away of all human qualities day by day.

Classilda Haven had stumped up to my door one evening late in April and inquired in a cracked voice if I wished to let the old gardener's cottage. She was a stranger to the district, I knew, and a woman of her age hobbling about unsheltered at that season is bound to be an object of pity. I asked casually if she had no relatives, no home; to which she replied that her son, her only means of support, had been killed in a motor lorry accident in London a week before. She had taken her few savings and entrained for Royalton, where she seemed to remember a distant relative was living. Arriving in the village she had found no trace of him, and so, without money, had wandered aimlessly down the Gablewood Pike.

There was, of course, no refusing such

a plea, and much as I disliked having my solitude interrupted, I had given her the key to the cottage, loaned her a few sticks of furniture, and tried to make her comfortable. In due time, I presumed, the relative would make his appearance and the woman would go on her way.

But as spring gradually wore into summer and these things did not happen, I began to look upon the old crone as a fixture. Not until August did the horror begin, and then I had undying reason to regret my philanthropy.

IT BEGAN with Peter Woodley. Woodley was a youth of twenty, a son of merchant villagers, in whom I had taken considerable interest. The boy aspired to paint. He had no unusual talent, it is true, yet his canvases had a certain simplicity in their likeness to surrounding landscapes that had caught my eye, and I had given him two or three art volumes that had found their way into the Hampstead library.

But on this morning as he stood in my study he appeared greatly excited and upset. His hair was clawed in wild disarray, and he was breathing hard, as if he had run to the manor all the way from Royalton.

"Mr. Hampstead," he gasped, "it isn't true, is it, the story I heard in the village? You're—you're not going to change the frog wall?"

I leaned back in my chair and stared at him. "The frog wall?" I repeated. "Why yes, Woodley, I'm going to have it repaired. Repaired, that's all. It's badly in need of work, and the masons are coming tomorrow. But what on earth——"

Young Woodley dropped into the chair opposite me and spread his hands flat on the desk top.

"You mustn't do it, sir. You can't. You promised me I could use it for one of my pictures."

"Why, so I did," I said, smiling. "I had forgotten. But I'm not changing the entire wall — just the two sections on either side of the gate. The stones have fallen almost entirely away, and I don't want the frogs to get through. That's the only reason for the wall being there, you know, Peter. The marsh on the other side is swarming with frogs. The wall was erected by my ancestors to keep the manor grounds free from the pests and permit the Hampsteads to sleep. . . . If it's rustic settings for your paintings you want, there are plenty of places——"

"But you don't understand, sir." Woodley in his earnestness was leaning far across the desk. "You don't understand. There's something on the other side of that wall besides frogs. There's something in that marsh that will get out, that will come into the grounds if you have the wall altered. I can't say what, sir. I really don't know what. But if you'd been out there at night in the moonlight, staring at the gate as I have, trying to see how I wanted to place my painting, you'd know."

I looked at him curiously there in the morning light of my study. "The wall is already down in those two places," I replied. "If there's anything in the marsh, and I'm quite sure there isn't, it certainly could get through now."

Woodley shook his head slowly, half in negative, half in perplexity.

"It's not the physical boundary I mean," he said. "It's not the wall itself. It's the actual space and time that it's occupied all these years that you're changing. Mr. Hampstead, don't do it!"

NATURALLY, such vague innuendoes did not induce me to countermand my order to the masons. Yet as the hours passed, something in the memory of Woodley's disturbing attitude instilled in me an indefinable sense of nervousness.

Several times I caught myself staring out of the window toward the decayed remnants of the old frog wall, wondering what the boy had meant.

I turned at length to the shelves of the Hampstead library and spent two hours among the ancient volumes there, trying to rest my curiosity. The diaries of each successive resident of the manor were still intact, and I knew they included all mention of wine-cellars, out-houses and rooms which had been added to Cannon Tower during the generations. Curiously enough, however, search as I would, I could find no allusion to the erection of the frog wall, save one, and this, in the last memoirs of one Lemuel Hampstead, 1734, was most confusing. It read:

> The Frogg Wall, which I have ordered builded, will this day be finished, God willing, and I am now contente to departe from this world and bestowe my title and possessions upon my eldest son. There will be no more tragedyes like that which befelle my father, Charles Ulrich, and his wife, Lenore. The wall will be blessed by the church in the manner which I have planned, and there will be a Holie Bible sealed in each corner poste. I——

Here age had left its mark on the page, and the writing became undecipherable. But vague and meaningless as it all was, it was enough to set me thinking hard.

I personally supervised the masons' work the following day. It was a prosaic affair. The two workers simply removed the crumbling bits of stone from the two sections of the wall flanking the gate and patched the aperture with modern bricks. But they were forced to move the gate forward a few feet because of the marshy condition of the ground.

Classilda Haven shambled up to me as I stood watching the men ply their trowels. She smiled a toothless, evil smile.

"Ye'll be changin' the frog wall, I see," she said in her rasping voice. "All of it?"

"No, just the two sections," I replied, viewing her presence with some irritation.

The aged woman nodded, and I found myself staring again into her strange eyes They were young, those eyes, clear and piercing, and they seemed oddly incongruous there in the wrinkled, leather-like face.

She turned abruptly, hobbled forward a few steps and, head down like a bird, stared at one of the workmen as he carefully placed his bricks in position. Gingerly she ran a veined hand along the newly mortised surface, then looked up and shrilled:

"Why don't you tear it all down?"

I forced a tolerant smile. "Don't be absurd, Classilda," I said. "If I did such a thing, the place would be overrun with frogs, your garden as well. You know that."

She made a queer reply, an answer which seemed to escape from her involuntarily.

"Frogs," she squeaked, her eyes gleaming queerly. "I like frogs. I like them better than anything in the world."

PETER WOODLEY came that afternoon with his easel and his box of paints. I saw him through the window of my study as he selected a position near the iron gate-door, opened his little folding camp-stool, and began to walk slowly back and forth along the side of the newly repaired wall.

His agitation, which had been so pronounced the day before, seemed to have left him, though I couldn't help feel that he looked upon the renovated stonework with resigned eyes. He moved about several times before he apparently found the angle he desired, then seated himself and began what I presumed were the charcoal outlines.

My book attracted my attention then, and I forgot the boy for perhaps an hour. But suddenly I was jerked out of my chair by an ear-splitting scream. With a

lurch I was across the floor and staring through the open casement at the weed-tangled grounds.

Peter Woodley lay prone on his face by his easel, his body still as death!

I raced out of the house and across the intervening space with all the speed I could muster. A moment later, as I examined him, I breathed a sigh of relief. He was still alive, but his heart was fluttering weakly. Cold water applied to his forehead and smelling-salts administered to his nostrils brought him around five minutes later; but when his eyes blinked open and he looked up at me, a moan of terror came to his lips.

"Good God! Mr. Hampstead!" he whispered. "I saw it! It was beautiful, but it was horrible. I saw it!"

"Saw what?" I asked, chafing his wrists. "In heaven's name, Peter, what's the matter?"

He struggled to his feet then, swayed dizzily and stepped over to his easel. For a moment he stood there, staring down at the few charcoal outlines on the canvas. Then he slumped weakly onto the camp-stool and buried his head in his hands.

"Mr. Hampstead," he said, looking up abruptly, "promise me you'll never let me come here again. Promise me you'll keep me away from the manor grounds, by force if necessary. I must never attempt to paint that wall again, do you understand? And you, sir, couldn't you lock this place up and move into the village? Couldn't you, sir?"

There was sincere anxiety written across his face, and his eyes were still gazing far out into space with a bewildered frightened expression that was foreign to the boy's usually calm nature.

"Nonsense, Peter," I replied. "You've been working too hard. You've let your imagination run away with you, that's all. Come into the Tower, and I'll give you a bit of brandy."

He shook his head, muttered something incoherently under his breath, and then, picking up his painting equipment, turned and strode quickly through the manor grounds toward the distant Gablewood Pike.

For a while I stood there, watching his figure grow smaller and smaller in the afternoon sunlight. I was puzzled more than I cared to admit by his strange attitude, and I was deeply disturbed by his allusions to "something which he had seen." For obviously as strapping a fellow as young Woodley does not faint dead away from sheer imagination. Neither does he babble queer warnings to a man twice his age without a reason.

And then as I turned and began to walk slowly toward the door of my study, my eyes suddenly took into focus a patch of ground near the old wall. The workmen repairing this section had, in order to aid their movements, torn up the weeds and rank underbrush which grew unmolested in this part of the property.

And there in the freshly upturned earth was the imprint of a gigantic bird-like claw.

It was ten minutes past twelve that night when I found myself sitting up in bed, staring at the radium dial of the taboret clock. Cannon Tower was still as death, and there was no sound from without save the distant mournful croaking of frogs beyond the wall. Even as I listened, that bass obbligato ceased abruptly, and the world lapsed into a heavy, ringing silence.

I got up, slid into a pair of slippers and moved across to the window. Curious. If there is one thing that is a certainty in my life, it is my profound manner of sleeping. Once retired, I seldom if ever awake before my usual rising hour. And yet there I was, eyes wide open, heart thumping madly with the terror and bewilder-

ment of one who has been jerked suddenly from the macabre fantasies of a nightmare.

But I had not been sleeping. Neither, I was positive, had any unusual sound disturbed my slumbers. The manor grounds stretched below me, blue under the August moonlight like a motionless quilt, and beyond, vague and indistinct, I could see the flat, barren expanse of Royalton Heath.

A thin blanket of clouds slid over the moon then, darkening the shadows into a thick, brooding umbra, and simultaneously it happened.

From the east, from somewhere deep in the recesses of the marsh that lay beyond the frog wall, there rose into the still air a horrible, soul-chilling cry. It was a cry I can never hope to forget, the scream of a bird of prey about to make its kill, a thousand times magnified, and ending in a high-pitched shriek that was strangely human.

Motionless I stood there, eyes riveted in the direction of the old wall, muscles tense as wire. For a moment I saw nothing, the blackness below me was thick and impenetrable. Then suddenly, with the quickness of a camera-shutter, the moon broke through that cloud mass once more, and the manor grounds returned to their blue silver.

The cry came again, nearer. The echo thrown back from the walls of Cannon Tower passed on into the distance like the wail of a lost soul, and with a choking gasp I turned my eyes skyward.

High above me, outlined against the driven cloud, circling like a giant vulture in the night, was a bird of colossal size. Its wing-spread was enormous, a full twenty feet from tip to tip, and its head and body were curiously elongated and heavy. Even as I stood there, staring at it, my face wet with terror, it wheeled and swooped toward me.

Forward, straight toward the Tower it sped as if intent on dashing itself to pieces against the ancient masonry. Then it veered sharply and raced toward my window.

An instant I stood there, transfixed. Then, stupefied and numbed as I was, my subconscious mind had enough clarity to whip me around and send me lurching back into the room. There was a century-old percussion pistol on the right wall, mounted in its carved metal holster, and I knew it was always loaded, a feeble but comforting protection in my solitude.

In the half-darkness I seized it, pushed the hammer to full cock, leaped back to the window and fired.

There came an instantaneous violent flapping of those mighty wings, an overpowering stench of death and decay, and crashing into my ear-drums a repetition of that hideous cry. The specter disappeared.

Faintness seized me then. Spots and queer-colored lights swirled in my vision, and I sank backward to the floor. But even as I closed my eyes to unconsciousness I knew, as I know now, that what I had seen was no dream, no vagary of a sleep-drugged brain.

For gazing at me there, with its huge feathered wings and repulsive vulture body, had been the face of a beautiful woman!

A BAD electrical storm came up next day after almost three weeks of sultry heat. I spent the morning pottering about my studio as usual. Outside, the thunder crashed and boomed ceaselessly.

But come afternoon I refused to be kept indoors any longer, and so, donning an old rain-jacket, I began my usual walk through the manor grounds. I was still weak and trembling from my unexplainable experience of the night before; my

brain was bewildered and seeking an answer.

The rain was coming down hard from a thick, gray sky, and the weeds and undergrass flanking the little path were dripping with wet. Behind me the great vine-covered walls of Cannon Tower loomed grim and silent.

At the gate-door of the frog wall I suddenly stopped. The barrier, always locked with staple and bolt, stood wide open, revealing just beyond the wild, undulating expanse of the marsh. I moved to close it, but a moment later Classilda Haven appeared, working her way up the reed-covered incline toward me. And for some unknown reason I viewed her presence there with suspicion.

"Classilda," I snapped. "Who gave you permission to go beyond the gate?"

Her clothes and her hair were dripping with rain, and the dishevelment gave to her, it seemed, a curiously repelling ornithoid appearance. It was odd, but never until that moment had I noticed how distinctly avian were the contours of her weazened body and her talon-like hands. She cocked her head to one side, looked at me, and laughed a squeaky laugh.

"I've been down in the marsh," she said. "I went to get some dirt for my garden. Those workmen, the careless fools, have trampled all over it."

I glanced at the orderly rows of lettuce and cabbages which in some places had been crushed and overturned by unobserving feet.

"Not workmen," I said. "I'm afraid it was young Woodley that did this. I shall have to tell him to be more careful. He comes here to paint, you know, at night sometimes in the moonlight, and I suppose he didn't notice where he walked. But," I added, remembering his words and firm decision which he had made following his fainting spell, "I don't think you'll be troubled with him any more. He's taken a dislike for the place, and he's staying away."

The old crone stood looking at me with those youthful, beady eyes. She smoothed some of the water from her black dress, shifted her basket of dirt to her other hand and smiled cryptically.

"Not too much of a dislike, Mr. Hampstead," she said, displaying her toothless gums. "He was here last night, painting. I spoke with him."

I stared at her. If both Classilda Haven and Peter Woodley had been awake and in the manor grounds during the night, then they too must have seen the hideous thing which had flown out of the marsh and looked in my bedchamber window. All the horror of what I had seen, all the terror of that nocturnal vision which the intervening hours had inclined to soften and pale in my memory, returned then, and I leaned weakly against the bole of a cypress tree.

"Classilda," I began slowly, "were you —did you see——"

But with a swish of her sodden skirts the old woman turned, laughed that mirthless falsetto laugh once more, and hobbled off toward her cottage.

Deeply troubled, I buttoned my jacket closer about the throat and continued my walk through the slanting rain. I was heading for the edge of Royalton Heath, where, as was my custom, I would stop a moment and gaze out over that somber stretch of wasteland which I had known for so many years. But this time my leisurely walk was destined to be interrupted.

Near the end of the manor grounds where the frog wall turned abruptly to the left and headed into the depths of the marsh, I came upon Peter Woodley. Hatless and without coat of any kind, he was sitting in the long, brown weeds, unmindful of the swirling rain and appar-

ently oblivious of my approach. And in his hands were two impossible things.

For a full instant I stood there gazing at him, watching his hands as they worked diligently at their task. Then I cleared my throat and spoke:

"Peter," I said, "what on earth are you doing with that bow and arrow? I thought you were an artist, not a huntsman."

He started as though prodded with a knife, leaped to his feet, and tried to conceal the two articles upon which he had been working. But as if through a telescope my eyes centered upon the arrow-shaft. It was the metallic arrow-head that held my gaze, a head long and slender, ending in a needle-point and made of silver.

Without answer Peter Woodley wrapped the two articles in a piece of canvas and seized a larger package from the ground, a package I had not noticed before.

"With your permission, sir," he said, "I'd like to walk back with you to the Tower. I finished my picture of the wall last night, and I'd like to hear what you think of it."

FIFTEEN minutes later, bent over the desk in my study, I stared down upon Woodley's newly painted canvas. The lowering clouds without had spread a premature darkness in the room, and I had lighted two of the candelabra. But even with this added illumination I could not quite believe my eyes.

For a long time I stood there, looking down at the oily brush marks, examining the background and the objects in the center. Then with a gasp of incredulity I sank into a chair.

"Peter, my boy!" I exclaimed, "did you actually paint this? It's excellent—a masterpiece!"

He looked suddenly wan and haggard as he seated himself opposite me and began to run his fingers absently along the design of the table.

"Yes," he said dully, "I did it. There are a few remaining touches to be added before it is completed, but the painting as you see it is the work of a few hours. I worked last night in your grounds by moonlight. I—I wish to God I hadn't."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He nervously lit a cigarette and leaned forward in his chair.

"Mr. Hampstead," he said, "that painting—I simply can't realize it came from my brush, done by my own hand. I meant to paint a simple likeness of the old frog wall with the iron gate in the center. But as I worked there in the moonlight, something seemed to take hold of me. I felt as if a will other than my own were controlling my thoughts. I painted as I have never painted before, worked at terrific speed in a nervous frenzy. And when I had finished I was in a state of complete exhaustion.

"I don't understand it, sir," he went on. "Sometimes I think I've been going mad the last few days. But there's something wrong with that picture, something terribly wrong. Every time I look at it I have a dreadful feeling it never should have been brought into creation."

"Nonsense, Peter," I said, looking across the desk at the propped-up canvas. "You've done an admirable piece of work. Frankly, I didn't think you had it in you. None of your earlier efforts have displayed such unusual talent as this."

Woodley left half an hour later, but not before I had persuaded him to leave the painting in my care.

"I'd like to study it if you don't mind," I told him. "I'm planning to go to London next month, and I may want to take this along. Perhaps I can place it in a contest for you, or if not, find someone who would like to buy it."

He seemed little affected by my words.

Ordinarily any compliment I might bestow upon his work would have been received with boyish enthusiasm and appreciation of my interest. But now he stood there in the doorway, hands hanging at his sides, eyes lowered as if he were oppressed by some mental cloud.

When he had gone I carefully shut all the doors to my study, returned to my desk and moved the painting a few inches farther back where there was no chance of shadow impairing my view of it. Then I trundled the heavy armchair into the center of the room to a position about four feet directly before the desk, sat down, and deliberately fastened my eyes upon the canvas.

I CONFESS that at the moment there was nothing positive in my mind which would account for my actions. But from the first moment I had gazed down upon the picture I had realized that young Woodley's strange speech was not the result of an overwrought imagination. Quite definitely there was something wrong with the painting. Something wrong, I say, and yet I was unable to see anything in the oil presentation beyond a simple and familiar scene.

That scene had been beautifully done, it is true. There was the old frog wall and the black bulk of the huge gate-door with the blur of the marsh in the background. The coloring and effect of the mellow moonlight had been accomplished with rare artistry, and it did not seem possible that so inexperienced and untrained a youth as Peter Woodley could have wielded a brush with such finesse. And yet more and more as I stared across at it there came the impression that I was looking upon something indescribably evil.

For perhaps ten minutes I remained there, studying each brush mark in the flickering glare of the two candelabra. Then abruptly, acting on impulse, I stepped across the room and unhooked the long framed mirror which adorned the farther wall.

I placed the painting now at an angle on the right corner of the desk. And at the opposite corner, lengthwise on a parallel angle, I set the mirror.

Returning to my chair, I adjusted my position slightly, then looked hard at the reflection in the mirror. Beyond the fact that the glass vision thus seen was the usual reverse of the original, there was no change.

But an instant later, with a choking cry I had leaped from the chair and, face down, had pressed my eyes to the looking-glass. In God's name, what I had seen could not possibly be true! It was a trick of my thoughts, a mental image projected into the droning solitude by a still persistent and bewildered memory. But no. . . .

Clearly focused in the mirror was the reflection of Peter Woodley's painting in oil. But my eyes had caught a different angle to the lines now, the perspective had changed, and where before I had seen only the likeness of the frog wall and the iron gate-door, and the marsh—in place of that was—a woman's face!

It was incredible, and it was incredibly beautiful. A woman's face returning my gaze silently—with black lustrous hair, Grecian features, and lips that were curved in a slight mocking smile; an exquisite face painted with classic loveliness but with strange piercing eyes I seemed to remember having seen once and many times before.

Many moments I remained there, staring far into the glass. Then I reached for the decanter, poured myself a strong, undiluted portion of whisky and slumped dazedly into the chair. My brain was going round and round, my heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

It would have been a most curious enigma, this optical illusion, this accidental use of the double perspective, even had I looked upon a reflected object thus that was new and foreign. But when I stopped to realize that what I saw there was not only familiar but engraved in my brain in a hideous memory of the immediate past, the whole vision became alive with horrific possibilities.

For the woman's face which looked back at me from the reflection of the looking-glass was the same face I had seen in the head of that loathsome flying monster that had peered into my bedchamber window the night before!

I ATE no dinner that evening. As dusk darkened into night and the thunder and rain dwindled off, I sat by the window of my study, staring out into the dripping grounds, drawing deeply on my old Hoxton pipe. The hours passed slowly. By ten o'clock the last remaining cloud had left the sky, and the moon rode high and clear.

I roused myself then, and still smoking furiously, let myself out of Cannon Tower and through the garden exit into the manor grounds. In contrast to the gloominess of the afternoon, the way before me now was brilliant under the blue light and tessellated with curious elliptical shadows from the overhanging verdure. Off in the marsh, the frogs, still unaware no doubt of the complete cessation of the storm, were silent.

I walked slowly, head down, immersed in my thoughts. When I reached the high gate-door in the wall, I paused a moment, reflecting how perfectly young Woodley had caught the moonlit scene in his painting. Then, knowing that sleep would be impossible under the circumstances, I crossed over to an old tree-stump, wiped the rainwater from its surface with my handkerchief, and sat down.

How long I remained there in the half-darkness I don't know. The moon moved high in the heavens and began to descend toward the west. I filled and lighted my pipe several times.

But suddenly the snapping of a twig whipped me out of my revery, and I turned to see Classilda Haven slowly advancing down the path. I watched her casually. Then I sat bolt upright, huddled farther back in the shadow, and stared with a rising feeling of perplexity.

What was the old crone doing in the grounds at this hour? And why was she skulking forward like a wary snake, looking back over her shoulder at each step to see if she were followed?

A moment later I was pressed close against the bole of a cypress tree, muscles stiffened to attention. With a final look behind her, Classilda Haven had stepped to the iron gate-door, unlatched the staple and pin, and was swinging the barrier slowly open. One instant she hesitated, head cocked to one side, listening. Then she passed through the aperture and disappeared in the direction of the marsh.

For a quarter of an hour I held my position, waiting for her to return. Far back in a corner of my brain a vague suspicion was beginning to grow, and I sought for an answer to the woman's strange actions.

Then it happened! The iron gate opened again — slowly, and a figure stepped into the shadows. It was not Classilda Haven. It was a woman who did not resemble the old crone in any way. She was young, tall, dressed in filmy white, with long raven hair that cascaded down her back. A moment she paused there, her hand on the latch. Then she moved into the open moonlight, and I jerked electrified to attention.

That face again — divinely beautiful with a satin complexion, carmine lips, and eyes black and piercing! The same

face I had seen once flying in the night and again in the changed perspective of Peter Woodley's painting! Was I going mad?

The woman seemed to glide slowly forward, to float down the path as though her feet were treading air. Presently she moved closer to the frog wall, raised one arm high over her head and began to move it up and down, back and forth, in long sweeping arcs.

She was writing! Writing in chalk! I saw that as the moonlight streaming through the trees focused the crumbling masonry and the silent figure in blue relief. A foot high and carefully fashioned in curious stilted lines the characters took form.

The word completed, the woman stepped back and studied it carefully. I looked out from my hidden position behind the tree and read:

"CELAENO"

The chalk word seemed to gleam like white fire against the gray darkness of the old wall, and although I could not at the moment fathom its meaning, it touched a responsive chord somewhere in my memory. Celaeno. It seemed——

There was something weirdly impossible in it all. Standing there deep in the shadow of the huge cypress tree, my unlighted pipe clenched tightly between my teeth, I felt as if I were viewing the scene from the doorway of another world.

The woman moved farther down the wall to a position on the other side of the iron gate-door. Abruptly she stopped again, raised the chalk and scrawled in those same stilted letters:

"CELAENO"

I thought then I had unwittingly made my presence known, for the woman, upon completion of the last letter, whirled and turned those penetrating eyes straight in my direction. But it was another sound which she had heard, a sound of slow footsteps advancing down the path.

In measured pace they came on, louder and louder, like the rhythmic cadence of a muffled mallet. An instant later another figure came upon the scene, and a new wave of bewilderment swept over me.

It was Peter Woodley—Woodley clad in an old green dressing-robe, with his eyes closed and his arms stretched stiffly before him in the manner of a sleepwalker. Straight toward the woman in white he advanced, step by step.

"I'm coming, Celaeno," he whispered. "Celaeno . . . I love you, Celaeno."

As he drew nearer, a slight smile turned the woman's lips. I saw it in the moonlight. And she leaned forward, grasped the boy by the right arm and began to lead him toward the gate.

But there, as the iron door swung open of its own accord, a change came over Woodley. His eyes flickered open, his body stiffened, and a hoarse cry sounded deep in his throat. On the instant he seemed to realize what was happening. He wrenched his arm away from the woman's grasp, turned, and with a scream of terror began to run down the path toward the Gablewood Pike.

Transfixed, held by some inner hypnosis, I stood there, looking after him. He fled like a deer, running wildly across the open patches of moonlight, the skirts of his green dressing-robe swirling after him. And when I again turned my eyes to the scene before me, three inexplicable things had happened.

The woman in white had disappeared; the iron gate-door was locked and pinioned from the outside; and the two chalk words scrawled upon the frog wall were no longer there!

PETER WOODLEY slammed open the door of my study next morning and strode into the room without knocking. I was thankful that he had come. There

were a thousand questions I meant to ask, the whole fantastic mystery to discuss. It was time, I realized, to talk openly.

But Woodley brushed aside my preliminary remarks with a wave of his hand.

"My painting," he cried. "Where is it? I'm going to tear it apart bit by bit and throw the pieces in the open fire! Give it to me!"

I stood up, walked across to the window, and answered him dully.

"It's gone," I said. "I had it locked here in the old wine cabinet. When I came down this morning I found the doors still locked but the picture gone."

He seemed on the verge of a complete collapse as he stood there swaying.

"Gone," he repeated in a far-away voice. "Gone." Then:

"It's that painting that's caused it all, Mr. Hampstead. It's a net, a spider-web that has entangled me and brought me under her power. Since I have finished it I can not help myself. I almost succumbed last night. She was beautiful. God, how beautiful! But when I think of the condition of my arm——"

"Your arm?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

He stared at me a moment as if hesitant to say anything further. Then, abruptly, he slipped out of his coat and pulled back the sleeve of his shirt.

"I haven't been to a doctor yet," he said slowly. "But I know medicines won't be able to do anything for me. This—this is not a physical ailment."

I took a step closer and then suddenly recoiled, a wave of nausea sweeping over me.

"Good God!" I whispered. "Not a physical ailment? Are you mad?"

From the elbow down, the flesh of the right arm was a horrible blackened mass, with the veins standing in livid prominence and the hand shriveled as in the last stages of gangrene.

"But Peter—yesterday!" I began in a trembling voice.

He nodded lifelessly.

"Yesterday," he replied, "that arm was all right. I found it this way when I awoke in bed this morning. Mr. Hampstead, don't you realize what we're up against? Don't you realize what it all means?"

I reached for the brandy glass and drank a little with shaking lips.

"Am I going mad, Peter?" I asked finally. "Are we both mad? None of it seems possible—like some strange dream that has become a reality."

Woodley turned abruptly and strode across to the wall of book-shelves on the farther side of the room. There he ran his eyes slowly along the stacked array of ancient volumes. At length he chose one and returned with it to the desk.

"I was here yesterday morning when you were still in bed," he explained. "I knew I could find what I was looking for in your library, and I wanted to verify my suspicions. Mr. Hampstead, when you read this, you must believe. You must help me. Together perhaps we can free ourselves."

THE volume he had laid on the desk before me was significant in itself. It was a copy of Richard Verstegan's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, that evil work long ago banned by God-fearing people as being inspired by Satan. Up to that moment I had never been aware that it existed in my library, but from the signature on the fly-leaf I saw it must have come into my ownership as part of the collection of Lemuel Hampstead, my ancestor of the Eighteenth Cen-

tury. Woodley now opened it to a middle page, and bending lower, I read:

And Neptune and Terra had three daughters. And their names were Celaeno, Aello, and Ocypete. But theye were offspring accursed, for theye were winged monsters with the face of a woman and the bodys of vultures. Theye emitted an infectious smell and spoiled whatever theye touched bye their filth. Theye were harpies!

With a choking cry I kicked back my chair and leaped to my feet. "Harpies!" I screamed. "God in heaven!"

Harpies! Those fabulous monsters, creatures of evil who delighted in carrying mortals from this earth to hell and everlasting torture! Harpies, winged horrors of classic mythology, sometimes with the face of a hag, sometimes with the body and face of a beautiful woman! Was it possible such fantasies were more than the mental creations of Grecian philosophers and actually existed in our own mundane world?

In a swirl of confusion the pieces of the mystery were beginning to take position in my brain. One thing I saw. Alone among my ancestors, Lemuel Hampstead had sensed the hideous danger that lurked in that ancient marsh, and under guise of keeping the frogs out of the manor grounds had erected a protecting wall. I recalled the faded passage I had read in his memoirs:

The wall will be blessed by the church, and there will be a Holie Bible sealed in each corner poste. . . .

Now I understood why the two manor residents previous to Lemuel Hampstead, Charles Ulrich and his wife, Lenore, had come to such dark and horrible ends, the woman dying from "a strange maladie whiche caused her face and hands to blacken and rot away," and the body of the man "to be found in the depths of the slough with his eyes torne from their sockets and his head slashed with the mark of claws."

An idea struck me, and I whirled upon Peter Woodley. "Classilda Haven!" I cried. "Classilda Haven, it is she——"

He nodded. "I've suspected so for a long time," he said. "But there are two more. Always three. They are the spirit of the storm winds. Their homing-place is said to be in Crete, but they can move about the world with the speed of light. They are the personification of classic evil, created perhaps by mass mental imagery long ago and still existing, a throwback from another age."

"Classilda!" I repeated dazedly. "Oh, the foulness of it!" I jerked to my feet. "I'm going to her cottage and——"

Woodley shook his head slowly. "You wouldn't find her now," he said. "But even if you did, nothing can harm them while in human form. No, we must wait." He turned on his heel, left the room a moment and returned with a long tube of rolled canvas. Opening it and removing its contents, I saw that he was holding the long bow and arrow which I had seen him working on in the grounds the day before.

"They're finished, sir," he said; "the only method I know of fighting them. A bow and an arrow with a silver head. I've made two arrows. What good they'd do even if they struck, I don't know. But we can try."

For a moment as the clock pounded its ticks through the silence of the room we sat staring at each other. Woodley's face was tight and drawn, his eyes were glassy, his hands shaking.

"Tonight," he said suddenly, "in a few hours the horror will begin. God help us!"

MIDNIGHT, and the wind was screaming over the grounds with the mournful whine of an Eolian harp. I lay stretched at full length in a clump of underbrush, waiting . . . waiting for I knew not what. At my side, within arm's reach,

lay Woodley's bow and his two silver-headed arrows. In my pocket was a metal bottle with the crucifix emblazoned on its sides.

There was water in that bottle, holy water from the little church in Royalton, obtained by Woodley early in the afternoon as part of our feeble and blind defense. What its Christian effect would be against these nightmares of another theology I did not know, but in case of any emergency I meant to use it.

We had made hurried plans there in my study before darkness closed in. Woodley was to remain in the Tower, all lights turned off, while I, armed with those strange weapons, kept watch near the wall. Not unless I called out for help was he to show himself, and then only with the utmost caution. I had argued hard before Woodley grudgingly consented to this arrangement.

"It's youth they want, Peter," I told him. "They want you because you're young. They care nothing about me. I'm a middle-aged man with a life half spent."

Time snailed by as I crouched there. Up above, the moon shone at intervals through rents in a flotilla of velvet clouds. Ahead of me the tree branches clawed the night darkness, and the tall, dead weeds undulated like snakes.

And then the garden door of the Tower creaked open, and I saw Peter Woodley step out and advance down the path. He had removed his hat and coat, and his face shone white as death.

Unable to understand his appearance, I hissed a warning at him there in the shadows.

"You fool!" I cried. "Go back! I didn't call."

My words had no effect. Slowly, stiffly, with the same mechanical sleep-walking pace that had marked his entrance to the grounds the night the harpy-woman wrote her name in chalk, he passed me and continued parallel to the wall. Straight to the iron gate-door he moved, then stopped motionless.

"Celaeno!" he called softly. "Where are you?"

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the moaning of the wind. Then mounting into the night air, wavering and hideous, came once again that wailing scream. From the other side of the frog wall it sounded, rushing nearer.

An instant later I had leaped to my feet and was staring above me. In the gloom, high over the manor grounds, circled that mighty shape—a giant, vulture-like bird with great pointed black wings *and the head and breast of a woman! A harpy!*

Heart racing, I watched it hover there, carried back and forth by the raging wind. Then my eyes turned farther to the left, and I jerked back with a shriek of horror. There were two more of the loathsome creatures, and those two were swooping down straight toward me.

Paralyzed, I caught a glimpse of female faces with exquisite features, long, streaming black hair and crimson, evil lips. Then a sharp claw ripped across my chest and tore my coat to ribbons. I struck out madly, felt my fists pound deep into the feathery expanse of their wings, struck again and went down, overwhelmed by their bodies.

It was a moment of madness. I fought with every ounce of strength I possessed, with terror striking deep into my very soul. I rolled over and over, sought frantically to free my right hand and draw forth the bottle of holy water.

A nauseating stench of death and decay seared into my nostrils. My face and body were bleeding from a hundred places, and I was fast losing my strength. But suddenly one of those razor claws yielded to my frenzied blows and with a

lunge I whipped my hand sideward, grasped the bottle, uncorked its spout and showered the water out before me.

The result was cataclysmic. The harpies leaped back and stood gazing at me, women faces twisted in expressions of stark hate. Again I whirled the bottle, this time spilling part of the contents into their eyes.

There was a double shriek of rage. The monsters ran clumsily backward, hesitated a moment, then swooped into the air and fled.

For a moment I leaned gasping against the trunk of a tree. Then as the realization that the horror still was not finished filtered into my bewildered senses, I turned, seized the bow and silver-headed arrows and ran on into the grounds.

Near the end of the property, far beyond the gate, I saw them again. They were flying high above me, three titanic shapes etched black against the moonlit sky. And in the claws of one of them, held by his hair, dangled the body of Peter Woodley.

With shaking hands I fitted an arrow to the bow-string and pointed it upward. Back until the bow was bent almost double I pulled, then released it. It whined upward, shot past one of the monsters—and missed.

Panting, mumbling a prayer aloud, I seized the second shaft and made ready to fire again. But the harpies had sensed their danger, ceased their circling and with enraged cries were heading high toward the frog wall and the distant marsh.

I gave a last frenzied look above me, took quick aim and let fly that last arrow. Upward it sped, a gleaming streak in the moonlight.

And suddenly the night was hideous with the cries and shrieks of the wounded monster. The creature fluttered and spun like a top. It opened its claws as it wobbled off toward the marsh, and the body of Woodley, released, dropped downward, fell like a meteor straight onto the jagged top of the frog wall.

An instant later I was at the boy's side, bending over his broken and blood-covered body. He rose up as I lifted his head in my arms.

"Thanks, Mr. Hampstead," he whispered. "It was—it was the only way."

He fell back with a sigh, and I was alone with the corpse of Peter Woodley.

There is little more to tell. No one believes me. The villagers stare curiously at my whitened hair and shrink away shuddering as I meet their gaze. The district doctor feels of my pulse, looks into the cornea of my eye and shakes his head perplexedly. And the police continue to search the countryside for some trace of Classilda Haven.

Fools! I have taken them to the gardener's cottage and shown them the empty black silk dress, nailed as it is to the center of the floor by a silver-headed arrow. I have led them to that section of the frog wall near the iron gate-door and traced slowly, letter for letter, the faint, almost obliterated lines that one moonlight night spelt so clearly the word "Celaeno." And I have placed on the table the wall mirror and Woodley's painting, which had been found somewhere in the depths of the marsh—placed them at their proper angles and pointed out the strange woman face that looked back silently from the changed perspective.

But in each case they only look at me sadly and murmur: "Poor man, there is nothing there."

"He looked carefully to the priming in the pan."

Son of Satan

By ARLTON EADIE

A weird story of Venice in carnival time, and the infatuation of a lovely maid for her golem lover

MASKS—mirth—music! The revels of the famous Carnival of Venice were at their giddy height.

The swelling domes and lofty campaniles of the fairy-like City of the Sea were delicately etched against the faint moonlight which trembled on the pearl-tinted beaches of the distant Lido. The light from thousands of perfumed wax candles, reflected from the mirror-lined walls of great gilded salons, escaped through

the tall arched windows to cast ingots of liquid gold on the rippling waters of the multitude of canals. Strings of lanterns, myriad-hued as the iridescence of fireflies' wings, danced and quivered on the gondolas that threaded their mazy way along the crowded lagoon, turning its waters to a fairy carpet of ever changing colors.

The whole city reeled with frolic, rocked with merry laughter. Songs and jests were on every lip. Every face was masked, for it was the gayest, maddest holiday of the year 1704, a time when the city that had once been hailed as Queen of the Adriatic was content to become the Mecca of Pleasure for the whole world; and the mask was not only tolerated, but compulsory on those who fared abroad during King Carnival's reign of revelry.

Night had fallen unheeded on the merry throng. Well it might, for night was being turned into day. For the moment, the stern and inexorable figure of Father Time was thrust from every mind. The sun sank but to make a more effective background for the illuminations and fireworks, the shrouding darkness a more convenient setting for amorous adventure.

On the balcony of the Palazzo Canigiani, overlooking the Grand Canal, yet far enough above it to be aloof and secluded from the crowd of boats, the Contessa Lisalda reclined on a pile of silken cushions, listening with languid indifference to the flood of fervid eloquence which poured from the lips of the young nobleman who knelt at her feet.

"Donna Lisalda, *vissere mie*"—even in the depth of his passion Martino di Orselo could not rid his voice of its customary drawl of affectation—"does not your own heart tell you that it is no idle fancy which has drawn me to your side this night?"

There was a slight arching of the finely penciled eyebrows, a sudden widening of the amber eyes. Save for these signs of half-ironical surprize Lisalda's beautiful features retained the stony, unfeeling immobility of some flawless marble statue.

"Certes, noble *Signor,*" there was a note of mockery in the full, rich voice. "Were I to rely on my heart for the desired information, Holy Week — nay, Christmas itself—might come and find me no wiser. So I fain must remain in ignorance of the reason why you have honored my poor dwelling with your august presence."

It would seem that the meanest intelligence could not fail to perceive the sarcasm, almost amounting to contempt, which lay in her words. But the patrician wits of the foppish Martino were none of the keenest at the best of times, and just at that moment he was so filled with a sense of his own dignity and importance that he would scarcely have credited the fact that anyone—even the proud beauty who had all Venice at her feet—would have the hardihood, not only to reject his suit, but to make fun of him as well.

The maiden was coy—so ran his complacent thoughts—well might she be, with the leader of Venetian fashion at her feet! A little fire and ardor, and the battle would be won: the fairest maid, the richest heiress in Venice would melt gracefully into his arms.

Throwing back the fine lace ruffle at his wrist, the better to display the costly jewel which gleamed on his little finger, Martino di Orselo placed his left hand on his brocaded vest on the spot where he imagined his heart to be situated. His right hand was raised dramatically in a gesture that he had seen used by an actor at the San Cristomo playhouse.

"It is your beauty that has lured me to you, Lisalda, your peerless loveliness and my desire to win you for my wife. Body of Venus, but you are indeed the fairest of your sex!"

"Indeed? Truly I thank you for your good taste, my Lord of Orselo." Her red lips rippled back in a smile which nevertheless showed but little indication of melting tenderness. "Haply your compliment was well meant—though it may be somewhat lacking in originality." She glanced aside at her reflection in one of the mirrors as she carefully rearranged a straying tendril of the Titian hair which crowned her like a veil of fire. "Surely you have not deserted your friends at the revels simply to assure me that I am not withered and ill-favored? Certes, men tell me that by words and looks a hundred times a day!"

"*Cospetto,* they were blind else!" he burst out, jerking abruptly to his feet. "But a truce to empty compliments, since whatever my poor tongue can utter must sound stale in the ears of one so accustomed to homage as you. So hear a plain truth, unadorned with flowers of speech. I love you, Lisalda, and desire you for my wife. How say you?"

THERE was a long silence as he stood gazing down at the perfect profile of her averted face. Floating through the casement came the sounds of distant laughter and the passionate throbbing of guitars from one of the gondolas as it stole past through the glimmering dusk. The melody swelled louder, then began to die in the distance, but still Lisalda della Canigiani spoke no word. Not until the last dying throb had mingled with the myriad noises of the care-free night did she raise her eyes of flecked amber, tiger-like yet strangely alluring, so that they gazed straight into his.

"Think me not unmindful of the great honor that you have done me in asking me to be your wife, Signor Martino. But, alas! it is an honor which I must decline to accept."

"Decline!" He echoed the word vacantly, in the tone of one who sees the impossible happening. In that moment of stunned surprize he found it hard to believe his ears. Decline? Refuse him? *him*—the richest, the noblest, the most eligible young bachelor in Venice? Surely she could not be in earnest! Her refusal must be some freakish jest, tuned to the mad mood of carnival-time!

Desperately the eyes of the curled and scented dandy searched the face of the girl he loved. And as he looked, he tasted the bitterness of defeat. There was no hint of playful coyness in the proud carriage of her head, no sign of secret mirth in the firm line of her scarlet lips to show that they had but jested when they had dashed his hopes to the ground.

He turned on his heel and caught up his mask and *velada*—the thin black mantle under which everyone from Doge to beggar concealed his identity during the Carnival. Then, with the ceremonious gallantry of the day, he bowed low and raised Lisalda's hand to his lips.

"*Addio,* fair charmer, since you have decreed it must be so," he hid the baffled rage in his heart with a smile and an affected drawl. "May I at least have the satisfaction of learning the name of the lucky swain who has supplanted—or perhaps I should say, forestalled—me in your affections?"

The light glinted on her radiant hair as she shook her head.

"Nay, *Signor,*" she smiled, but her eyes were somber and sincere. "If it be any solace to your wounded heart, you may rest assured that no man has yet awakened love in my own."

"No man?" he asked quickly. "Then I live again, for that means I still have hope?"

Again she shook her head.

"Then abandon your hope, that it may die quicker and more mercifully than if it lingered," she answered coldly. "Never

will my heart feel the throb of love until I meet the man who fulfills my idea of a fitting mate for me."

"So you await the coming of the ideal lover?" His voice held a sneer which he did not attempt to conceal. "Your fancy soars far above poor imperfect humanity, that you must needs create a paragon of a creature of your own imagining? But what if this perfect suitor does not materialize?"

"He will come—I feel it—I know it!"

"*Corpo di Bacco!* May I be there to see him when he does! Right gladly would I learn the type of perfection that is conjured up by the fond day-dreams of a love-sick maiden!"

"I will tell you, Signor Martino." Her head was turned away, her eyes looking dreamily out into the starry splendor of the night. "When he comes—as come he must some day—he will be tall yet graceful, strong yet tender, handsome without vanity, wise but not lacking in witty conversation. But above all he will be constant. His heart will turn to mine with the unswerving allegiance of the compass-needle to the pole."

"By the bones of San' Marco, *Illustrissima,* you draw the line devilishly high in the matter of this phantom lover of yours!"

She lifted her white shoulders in a tiny shrug.

"I ask for no better epitaph to be graven on my tomb," she returned proudly. "And it were well that you should bear the fact well in mind. Donna Lisalda d'Canigiani draws the line high—and draws it fast. And it is far above the head of Signor Martino di Orselo!"

"Then may your quest be fortunate, *madonna!*" He ground the words out savagely as he caught up his three-cornered hat and settled his mask in position. Then with a curt "*Addio!*" he was gone.

As the masked cavalier emerged from the door of the Palazzo half a dozen gondoliers, all eager to serve so lordly a patron, caused their boats to converge toward the landing-stage as though drawn by invisible strings. Martino thrust aside the black velvet folds of the *felze* which shrouded the windows of the tiny cabin of the nearest gondola and threw himself upon the cushions.

"Whither, *Sior Maschera?*" the gondolier asked; for the mask was something more than a mere disguise in Venice. It was an incognito, rigidly to be observed by high and low. Even had the man been aware of the identity of his noble passenger he would not have dared to address him otherwise than by the title "Sir Mask." Name, rank, identity itself, were hidden under the scrap of silk that concealed the erstwhile subjects of King Carnival.

Not until the man had repeated his question did Martino rouse himself from the revery of his enraged and bitter reflections.

"Whither? Oh, anywhere — to the Devil if you like!" he answered impatiently. "This night I have tried to embrace an iceberg, and my bones are still frozen to their marrow!" He tossed a *soldo* into the fellow's ready cap. "Ply your oar briskly, and carry me where I can thaw myself in the hottest hell you know of!"

The man, a gray-haired ruffian, wise in his generation, grinned as he pocketed the coin.

"What say you to the *festa* on the Piazetta of San' Marco?" he asked with a leer. "There all feet are ready to dance to Cupid's tune, and never an iceberg will you find——"

"To it then," the *signor* interrupted, with a harsh laugh. "Let those embrace phantoms who will—I want to jostle elbows with real flesh and blood!"

The gondolier spat on his horny palms

and grasped his long oar. Presently the light craft was threading its way beneath the arch of the Rialto Bridge, toward where the two domes of Santa Maria della Salute marked the end of the Grand Canal. The open paved space on the other side of the waterway was their destination.

Alighting from the gondola, Martino di Orselo found himself in a pandemonium of noise and merriment well calculated to make the saddest mortal forget his troubles. Stretching along the arched façade of the Doge's Palace, past the five great doors of the Cathedral of St. Mark, a mushroom growth of tents, stalls and booths had sprung up in the Square. The din was incessant; trumpets blared, fiddles squeaked, drums beat, every showman strove with the full force of his leather lungs to attract the attention of the passing throng to the pictured marvels which hung before the various booths as an indication of what might be seen within upon payment of the modest entrance fee.

It seemed as if the whole world had been ransacked to bring such an orgy of freaks and wonders together. Cheek by jowl were Indian jugglers, Ethiopian giants, tame lions, bears that drilled like soldiers with pike and musket, Arabian dancing-girls whose slender, dark-skinned bodies, supple as snakes, performed contortions which awakened more than wonder in the breasts of the beholders. A sleek, glib-tongued rascal pretended to draw teeth painlessly—with a lusty drummer stationed beside him on the platform to drown the victim's cries. A Spanish quack doctor, in threadbare academic robes and a full-bottomed wig very much out of curl, sold phials of the veritable Elixir of Life at what seemed an absurdly low price. A wrinkled hag in Egyptian dress held up a greasy pack of cards as she offered with shrill insistence to tell the fortunes of the bevy of girls who, half fascinated, half fearful, clustered in a semi-circle round the door of her patched and tattered tent.

"Come on, my pretties, don't be backward in coming forward," she cried coaxingly. "Who wants to know what the future has in store? Ah, even without cutting the cards I can see there's rich and handsome husbands waiting for some of you at the crossroads! Wouldn't you like to know which of you are the lucky ones? Then step inside and let old Mother Vengoldisia tell you. I'm here at your service, dearies, for whatever trifle you like to drop in the box as you go out —it's written in the stars that you'll never feel the want of what you give to Mother Vengoldisia. She's the seventh daughter of a seventh son, and nothing's hid from her. Forewarned is forearmed, they say, so you'd better know what's coming to you, so's you can seize your fortune with both hands as it gallops past on the dark horse. So don't miss your chance through being shy. Step inside, my pretty maids. One at the time, and first come first served."

Martino di Orselo, hovering in idle curiosity on the fringe of the crowd, smiled skeptically beneath his mask as he listened to the harangue. He lived in a superstitious age, it was true, but the spectacle of this unwashed vagrant claiming to be omniscient evoked only amusement in his educated mind. But, whatever her knowledge of the future might amount to, it was at least clear that she possessed a very comprehensive knowledge of human nature. Her speech, short as it was, had cunningly touched the deepest chords of the human heart: hope of gain—fear of losing it—and above all the prospect of satisfying the craving to know the unknowable, which is as abiding in humanity as life itself.

"A smooth-tongued rogue," was his

mental comment as, with a shrug of his cloaked shoulders, he made to turn away.

The glance of Vengoldisia's beady eyes, darting here and there among the crowd in search of a likely customer, came to rest as they fixed on the masked profile of the young cavalier. She darted toward him, the crowd falling back to give her passage with a respect that was not unmixed with dread.

"One moment, noble *signor*. A word in your ear, with your gracious permission."

Arrested by the urgency of the croaking whisper, Martino swung round. A tolerant laugh came from his lips as he looked down at the bent figure of the self-styled sorceress.

"I fear you've brought your wares to the wrong market, dame," he said with a shake of his head. "There is no beautiful heiress hastening to greet *me* at the crossroads!"

A gap-toothed grin deepened the wrinkles of the dusky face.

"Perchance she goes to meet another—one who is more difficult to find!"

The cryptic words fitted in so deftly with his recent interview that Martino found himself regarding the shrunken features with a new and deeper interest.

"You speak strangely confident for a wandering woman of Egypt——" He broke off with another laugh, as though at his own credulity. "Pshaw! perhaps 'tis not so strange that one of your random shots should have found the mark."

The gipsy came closer, sinking her voice to a whisper little louder than a breath.

"It were stranger still that one so well-favored and highly born as you should sue in vain——"

He started violently.

"You know me?" he asked in amazement. "Can those bleared old eyes penetrate a silken mask?"

"Not my eyes—my inner understanding—the gift that is the only heritage of my despised race." The clutch of her claw-like hand tightened on his arm. "You are the Signor Mart——"

"Hush! no names!" He glanced round, acutely conscious of a listening lull among the bystanders. "If you must address me, call me 'Mask'."

"So be it, *Sior Maschera,*" she answered with what sounded like sardonic emphasis. "After all, is it not a fitting title for all men? Are not all faces—aye, and all tongues!—mere masks to hide their owners' real feelings and desires? You, *Signorino,* although you affect to deride my powers, are you not burning with impatience to hear more? Are you not wondering how much I really know—and whence comes my knowledge? I can read your desires even before they form themselves in your own mind."

She drew him farther away from the curious crowd and went on rapidly:

"Rest content, *Eccellenze,* the desired knowledge shall be yours this very night. But this is no place for such confidences. The walls of my tent are thin and tattered, and I would speak of matters which, did but the faintest echo of their import reach the Inquisitors of the Holy Office, would bring us both to the faggot-pile and the stake."

"Where then?" The words seemed to come from his lips without conscious effort.

"Meet me at midnight at the *Traghetto della Madonetta.* A gondola will be waiting there to bear us to a place where I can safely reveal a plan whereby the proud maid who now spurns your suit shall be compelled to creep meekly to your embrace."

"You are indeed a mighty magician if you can accomplish that!" Martino re-

turned gloomily. "I will hear your plan —but I promise nothing—yet. I have tarried here too long already. Till midnight, *addio!*"

He drew the folds of his cloak closer round him and plunged into the crowd of noisy revelers.

THE deep-toned chimes of the great bell on the clock-tower of the Piazza San Marco were booming forth under the hammer strokes of the mechanical figures which flanked it, as Martino di Orselo turned into the narrow, unlighted street which, running between the towering walls of two ancient palaces, gave access to the *Traghetto della Madonetta.*

Usually these *traghetti,* or landing-stages for the gondolas, are situated in the most frequented parts of the city, but the one that bore the name of "The Little Madonna" was but little used even at the busiest time of day. Now it was utterly deserted and, save for the feeble gleam of the taper which some pious hands had placed before the small statue which gave the landing-place its name, shrouded in complete darkness.

Scarcely had Martino set foot on the creaking wooden steps, before a gondola, its sable hull scarcely visible against the surrounding gloom, glided silently inshore until it grazed the weed-covered piles.

"Enter!" invited a croaking voice from the impenetrable darkness beneath the *felze.*

Before complying, Martino cast a quick glance at the gondolier who stood at the stern, resting on the long, single oar with which he propelled the boat. By the dim rays of the votive candle at the shrine, Martino caught a glimpse of a face and figure so deformed, gnarled and repulsive that they might have belonged to the dread ferryman, Charon himself.

"Who is this man?" Martino asked suspiciously.

"Fear not. He will not betray you," Vengoldisia laughed back. "He is dumb."

"Where is our destination?" the young man asked, still hesitating.

"Near at hand, yet far enough distant to be safe from prying eyes," was the cryptic reply. "Time presses! Be pleased to enter."

Shrugging his shoulders, and reflecting that his youth and strength would prove a match for his two aged fellow voyagers if it came to a display of physical violence, Martino stepped over the low gunwale and seated himself by the side of the Egyptian woman. He was careful, however, to place the silver hilt of his smallsword in such a position as to make it handy for quick drawing should the occasion warrant it. Venice in the year 1704 was by no means a city where anyone could feel entirely at ease when taking a midnight trip in strange company to an unknown destination. It was an age when mysterious, weighted sacks were thrust from unlighted casements, to fall with a sullen splash into the dark waters of the canal; when the bravo's dagger and the poison cup were recognized resources of statesmanship.

Nor was the course taken by the gondolier calculated to allay the misgivings of a nervous passenger. Avoiding the main canals, he threaded a devious course through a maze of narrow, evil-smelling waterways, away from the stately palaces and open squares, into the very heart of the oldest part of the city, inhabited by the poorest of the poor.

"You have a strange notion of a secluded rendezvous for the discussion of secrets!" He broke the long silence with the sarcastic observation as the boat passed through a perfect rookery of low-class houses.

"Patience, *Signor,*" his guide coun-

seled. "The place for which we are bound is lonely enough to satisfy the solitude of a hermit."

As she spoke, the gondola rounded a sharp bend. The next moment it had glided out into the bright moonlight of the open sea, its fretted prow pointing straight toward a solitary tower which seemed to rise sheer from the silvery water.

Martino gave a cry of mingled surprize and recognition as his eyes fell on the grim, ancient pile.

"The Lupa?" he gasped.

The woman nodded. "Is it not a fitting place where perilous words may be spoken—with naught but the rats and sea-gulls to overhear?"

Martino sat silent, musing. The Lupa, the "Tower of the She-wolf", bore a sinister reputation—was, in fact, said to be the abode of evil spirits. It had been built, when the vigor of the war-like republic was at its height, as part of the outlying fortifications of Venice. But that was in the days when the Winged Lion of Saint Mark had been a lion indeed, ready to meet every attack whether from land or sea. Times had changed since then; the sun of Venice was fast setting in the sea from which it first arose. Long years of peaceful prosperity and luxury had sapped the fighting-spirit of the descendants of the rugged mariners who had made their insignificant island state a power to be feared, whose cannon had thundered at the walls of Byzantium and Constantinople.

The Tower of the Lupa had been allowed to fall into ruin. Incredible as it may sound, its guns had been sold by a corrupt general to the very Turks they had formerly defied. And now the ancient fortress stood derelict and forsaken, a fitting monument and symbol of the glory that had passed never to return.

What manner of secret was about to be revealed to him within its sea-girt walls?

The gondolier, in spite of his age, was not lacking in strength and skill. He deftly rounded the shoulder of the great bastion and with a dozen sweeps of his oar brought the light craft neatly alongside a narrow platform of stone, which terminated in a flight of steps leading to a doorway that now gaped wide to every wind of heaven.

VENGOLDISIA sprang lightly ashore with the assured step of one who treads familiar ground. Martino, all eagerness now that he was fairly entered on his adventure, followed hard at her heels. They passed beneath a crumbling arch, along a short vaulted passage, down a flight of stairs which seemed to delve deep into the living heart of the rock on which the Tower was built.

Martino felt the swirl of air as another door, unseen in the inky darkness, swung open at the woman's touch; he heard the rasp of rings on a metal rod as a heavy curtain was drawn aside.

The sudden blaze of brilliant light within almost blinded him for a moment. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and stared, and as the scene before him grew clear in every ghastly detail, a great wave of superstitious dread fastened like an icy hand upon him.

The hall—for its huge proportions made it worthy of that name—was considerably larger than the tower which stood above. Indeed, its loftiness and spacious width, together with the number of steps which he had descended to reach it, made Martino suspect that it must lie well below the bed of the shallow sea which surrounded the lonely rock. His suspicion was fully confirmed when, even as he stood transfixed in that moment of surprize, he heard, muffled and dulled

like a far-away drum, the slow beating of the waves on the shore overhead.

The huge room was, naturally, absolutely windowless; but it was plain that some cunning system of ventilation amply made up for the deficiency. The numerous lamps burnt with undimmed flames; the air, though heavy with some subtle perfume, was fresh and cool.

The furnishings were rich, but fantastic to a degree that, in that credulous age, was positively terrifying. The thick-pile carpet was blood-red in color. Crimson tapestries of grotesque design covered the rocky walls; the table and the heavy, throne-like chairs were of red lacquer, their intricate workmanship proclaiming their Chinese origin; even the ceiling had been painted the same ominous hue.

Yet there was one object in that room which did not partake of the vivid and predominating crimson. Stretched upon the table was something white as the driven snow. Its striking contrast drew the young cavalier's eyes to it before he had time to take another step forward. A thrill of cold fear passed through him as he realized that he was gazing at the figure of a man, rigid, stark and motionless.

He started violently backward, a hoarse cry bursting from his lips.

"A corpse!"

A slow, satirical smile passed over the Egyptian's dusky countenance as she watched in evident enjoyment the consternation of her visitor.

"Fear nothing. That form has never drawn the breath of life. Look closer, and you will smile at yourself for thinking it had ever lived."

In spite of the undisguised mockery of the old woman's assurance, Martino felt his confidence creeping back again. He approached the table, and the next moment he had difficulty in repressing the burst of laughter which rose to his lips in the sudden revulsion of feeling caused by the sight that greeted his eyes.

The thing before him was a mere grotesque travesty of the human form. Composed of some wax-like substance, it had been rudely and unskilfully fashioned without the slightest attempt at anatomical accuracy or artistic beauty. Four elongated rolls of wax represented the limbs, their respective positions alone denoting which were the arms and which the legs. The head was a mere ill-shaped ball, into which two pebbles had been stuck for eyes. Beneath was a blob of wax which was evidently intended for the nose; a wisp of tow did duty for the hair; while a fish-bone, placed across the lower part of the sphere, gave the impression of a grinning mouth to the otherwise vacant countenance.

Martino's brows contracted in an angry frown as he stood looking down on the grotesque effigy.

"Have you brought me here to amuse yourself with an ill-timed jest?" he demanded. "What is the meaning of this absurd figure?"

The sorceress did not quail before his lowering glance.

"It represents the lover of Lisalda d'Canigiani's dreams," she returned steadily.

"Diavolo!" he burst out furiously. "You dare to make a mock of me——"

"Hear me out, and you will see that I am in deadly earnest." There was a dignified, almost arrogant note in the cracked voice. Gone was her former tone of cringing servility; she spoke as to an equal. "This wax figure is a *golem*. Do you understand what that means?"

He shook a puzzled head, and she went on impressively.

"It is a name well known to those who practise the magic arts. By means of certain rites and incantations, this inert wax can be changed into a living being.

Even as Adam, the first man, received the breath of life into his body of clay, so will the rude image that I myself have shaped be endowed with vitality—but not from the same Divine Power! Another, less hallowed, name must be invoked. But, as the first man rose from the dust of the earth, so shall this image rise from that table—not, mark you, ill-shaped and ugly as you see it now, but strong, handsome, flushed with the vigor and desires of hot-blooded youth—the very incarnation of one of the splendid gods of ancient Greece—an Adonis—an Apollo! He will breathe, think, walk and talk like the men that are born of women—nay, say rather like a very god among men! *And like a very god he will woo the proud Lisalda as she desires to be wooed!"*

"A fair prospect for me, truly!" Martino answered with a bitter laugh. "Even if you can accomplish this amazing thing, how can it profit my suit to the lady? I stand poor enough chance as it is, without the added disadvantage of the rivalry of a demon lover endowed with all the graces of his infernal procreator!"

"PATIENCE, young *Signor,* and do not rashly condemn a scheme of which you have as yet heard but half." Vengoldisia's voice was like the purring of a cat that anticipates a tasty feast. "If by my spells I can induce the dread Power whom I serve to endow this figure with life, I can also revoke that gift at any moment that you choose. Picture what will happen if you agree to my plan. This misshapen mass of wax becomes the living ideal on which Lisalda has set her wayward heart. You will take him to your house as an honored guest; provide him with money and rich clothes; introduce him to your friends as a distinguished foreign nobleman, traveling for pleasure. As soon as convenient, present your mysterious *protégé* to the Contessa. He will be the living counterpart of the mental images he has so fondly treasured. She cannot fail to be enamored—enthralled! For, young as the handsome stranger may appear, he will possess all the experience of the human heart, its passion and its weakness, that his dread Master has accumulated since Eve renounced Paradise by the first sin of all. In a few hours all Venice will know that the fastidious Lisalda has at last met her heart's desire."

"A pretty picture!" The young man frowned at the vision that the witch's words conjured up. "And then?"

"Then will be the time to strike!" was the glib response. "In the first flush of her new-found happiness, before her mad passion has had time to feel the first cooling breath of satisfied desire, I break the spell which gives her lover life. In an instant, before her startled eyes, maybe even as he is clasping her unresisting body to his heart, the end of her romance will come. Her god-like lover will crumple, shrink, wither—until she finds that she is embracing a hideous waxen doll!"

Martino di Orselo stroked his chin thoughtfully.

" 'Tis a revenge that might satisfy the hate of the Archfiend himself," he mused slowly. "But I desire more than vengeance—I want the lady herself."

"She will be yours!" was the confident answer. "Make it your business to be near at hand when the *golem* returns to his native wax. Then will be the time to press your suit and catch her heart on the rebound. Wounded pride, superstitious terror, dread of being denounced to the Holy Office as one tainted with the kisses of lips red-hot from Hell—everything will lure her to your arms at such a soul-shaking moment of revelation. I trow she will have had enough and to spare of ideal lovers! She will be well content to bestow her hand—and fortune—on a

husband of honest flesh and blood. A little courage, a little patience, a little tact—and she is yours!"

Martino said nothing; his eyes were veiled in thought. The cold-blooded villainy of the proposal did not repel him. There was nothing heroic or self-sacrificing in his love for the beautiful heiress. The loss of her fortune had balked his greed quite as much as the loss of herself had galled his pride. Though the plan had at first sounded utterly fantastic, it now seemed to offer at least a chance of success. But there was one important item that Vengoldisia had so far omitted to mention.

"I suppose you are not purposing to do all this for me for the sheer fun of the thing," he commented shrewdly. "What reward do you ask?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" he echoed in amazement. "Surely that is passing strange——" He broke off at a sudden thought. "But perhaps your august Master intends to claim his own fee—later on?"

The sorceress shrugged her shoulders.

"That is as may be," she returned sullenly. "But you may rest assured that he can demand nothing but what is offered to him of your own free will. I do this thing simply because I am constrained to do it by a Power I cannot disobey. You, *Signor,* are under no such compulsion, and it is for you to decide whether I shall perform the rites or not. Answer quickly, *Signor,* for the dawn is near at hand and my arts avail not after the sun has risen. Shall I do this thing or not?"

He made a careless gesture, like a gambler staking a trivial coin.

"Then do it—if you can!"

Her answering smile showed that she at least had confidence in her unsanctified art.

"First it is necessary to inscribe the name of the person whom the *golem* shall represent when it awakes to life," she said, and with the point of a needle she wrote "Adonis" on the breast of the figure.

"That name is one of the designations by which the Archfiend was known in ancient times!" exclaimed Martino.

Vengoldisia's black brows twitched slightly upward at his words.

"So you are not entirely unversed in the rudiments of thaumaturgy? You are quite right. Adonis is the name by which the Prince of Hell is invoked when he is desired to appear in the guise of a comely youth. Small indeed would be his chance of winning Lisalda's love were he to woo her under some of the dreadful shapes which he assumes! But be silent, else my spell is of no avail."

She flitted quickly round the room, her loose cloak fluttering behind her like the ragged plumage of some obscene bird, and as she passed each lamp she extinguished the flame with a quick puff of breath which sounded like the hiss of an angry serpent. Presently the great room was in darkness save for the single dim light which she allowed to remain burning immediately above the waxen figure. Placing a tripod brazier within arm's reach of the white, shapeless head, she fanned the smoldering charcoal until it had assumed a bright red glow.

This accomplished to her satisfaction, she disappeared into the deep shadows which draped the farther end of the apartment. There was the sound of a door being unlocked, and presently she reappeared bearing a small ivory casket, curiously carved, and a crystal phial containing a dark purple liquid.

REPEATING her warning that Martino was not to utter a sound, as he valued his life, she took a piece of white chalk and drew a circle completely round the *golem* and brazier, muttering the

while in an unknown but strangely sonorous tongue. Martino noticed that she was careful to make a low obeisance, after the manner of the slaves of the East, before entering the mystic circle, and another, even deeper, the moment she stepped within.

With a shrinking of horror the solitary onlooker realized that the sorceress was paying homage to her dread lord and master!

The rush of fearful thoughts bewildered him. Like a man in the grip of a fantastic dream he watched her take a pinch of powder from the ivory box and cast it into the brazier. A faint spiral of bluish smoke coiled upward from the glowing embers and the air became permeated with the cloying fumes of some drowsy incense. Although he remained perfectly conscious during the scene which followed, Martino had a sense of tenuous veils being drawn across his eyes. His sight became blurred and indistinct; the muttered incantations mingled with the muffled thunder of the waves against the shore overhead, like the sad rise and fall of some unhallowed dirge.

He sensed rather than actually saw the hag moisten a sponge with the contents of the crystal phial and squeeze it, so that the potion fell in great purple drops on the *golem's* grinning lips.

He stared with all his might; blinked his eyes, rubbed them and stared again. For into the dead whiteness of the wax a faint, flesh-like tinge was beginning to creep. The limbs were altering their shape, growing rounder, smoother, with swelling muscles and articulated joints. The crude stumps became endowed with hands and feet; the misproportioned trunk took upon itself a recognizable semblance to a human torso; the grotesque countenance merged into the lineaments of a youth, perfect in its strength and clear-cut beauty.

"Arise, Adonis!" the woman's measured voice was now speaking in words that could be understood. "Thou who art not of the dust of the earth nor of the spirit of heaven—Arise! Thou who art not born of woman, but conceived in the womb of Hell—Arise! Let thy nostrils receive the breath of life which is not as the life of mortal men. Let thy heart beat, thy blood course through its channels, thy whole being become an entity complete in itself. Arise, beautiful as the dawn, radiant as the evening star! Arise, Adonis, I beseech thee. Arise and live!—Live!—*Live!*" Her voice rose to a frenzied shriek at the final word.

A feeling of intense terror came over Martino di Orselo. With wild, distended eyes he saw the shapely limbs twitch and quiver with awakening life. Then, with the casual movements of any sleeper who rises from his couch refreshed, the Thing swung its legs over the edge of the table and stood upright, its face and naked form peerless and splendid as a sculptor's dream.

The witch's cackling laugh broke the death-like silence that followed.

"Allow me to present to you Signor Adonis di Luchio," she said with what sounded like a note of triumph, as she bowed to Martino. "Your friend and companion henceforth!"

It was the night of Shrove Tuesday, and the time of carnival was drawing to its close. In a few hours midnight would proclaim the coming of Lent, the season of fasting and prayer, and the mortification of the desires of the flesh. Then all merry-making would cease; the mask would be cast aside for the mass-book, the tuneful lute for the penitent's scourge.

But a few precious hours of love and laughter yet remained, and Venice was making the most of them. Like mariners on the eve of submitting to the stern dis-

cipline and privations of a long voyage, or soldiers trying to cram all the roistering joy into a last debauch before facing a desperate encounter, all Venice was draining the cup of pleasure to the very dregs.

Sackcloth and ashes tomorrow—but tonight let Saturnalia reign!

The Palazzo Canigiani was crowded to the doors. A flotilla of gondolas lay before its wide flight of steps, a dozen or more to each gayly-painted mooring-post. From roof to water's edge, every window was a blaze of light. For that day the Contessa Lisalda had been formally betrothed to the handsome stranger from across the sea, and a magnificent fête was in progress to mark the event.

At the head of the great banqueting-table, on chairs slightly raised above their guests, the happy pair sat side by side. Lisalda's face was flushed, her lips smiling, and ever and again her laugh rang out with the joyous abandon of one who sees the apex of her desires within easy reach.

Strangely cold and impassive by contrast was the countenance of Signor Luchio. His half-veiled eyes roamed over the assembled company with an expression of indifferent contempt. He listened to the jests, the toasts, the showered congratulations and neatly turned speeches with an air of bored condescension. It almost seemed that, having accomplished his object in winning Lisalda's affection, he had no intention of making even the slightest endeavor to gain the good-will of her friends and relations.

Once or twice his insolent gaze rested for a moment on the face of Martino di Orselo, who occupied the place of honor immediately below the chair of the mistress of the house. Wine had flowed freely throughout the feast, and the young cavalier had seldom refused the replenished cup. He had drunk deeply to drown the jealous anger which consumed him at the sight of the girl's infatuation for the *golem* lover which he himself had thrust into her eager arms. But the treacherous juice of the grape, far from soothing him, had but added fuel to his smoldering rage. Bitterly he cursed the hour in which he had been induced to become a party to the diabolical plot.

The behavior of his sinister fellow-conspirator gave him cause for uneasiness. Luchio had, it was true, played his part with all the skill and cunning that might be expected of a creature with such infernal tutelage. But, instead of being a mere puppet in Martino's hands, the *golem* had shown a disturbing tendency, not only to resent all interference, but actually to impose his will on his human ally. There had been no open rupture between them, but by insensible degrees Luchio had assumed control of the undertaking, until Martino had found himself a mere cipher, a passive onlooker who witnesses a stage play without quite knowing whether it is to end in comedy or tragedy. Like many another rash meddler with unknown powers, Martino had discovered that the Devil was easier to raise than to lay.

His position grew more false every hour. Most of the guests present seemed to be perfectly well aware that he occupied the invidious rôle of the rejected suitor at the betrothal feast of the woman who had chosen another. He had been conscious of their covert whispers and pitying glances since the moment when the lackey had announced his name at the door. He smiled grimly under cover of his wine-cup as he thought how easily he could turn the tables on his rival. Little did the dignified prelates and portly senators around him dream of the real nature of the handsome cavalier whose health they were drinking. It was a pity that he had not thought of ordering Ven-

goldisia to revoke her spell at that very moment. What a climax to that merry feast! He could picture the horrified consternation that would take the place of the smiles which now beamed on every face, when they realized they had been clinking glasses with the spawn of the foul fiend himself.

So engrossed was he in these pleasant anticipations of revenge that he failed to notice that the other guests had risen from the table. It was not until one of the servants touched him on the shoulder that he looked up with a start and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Will you be pleased, *Eccellenze,* to join the others in the dancing-salon?"

"A murrain on their dancing!" Martino growled thickly. "If one of them had his deserts he'd be dancing at the end of a rope! Hands off, fellow!" he cried, as the servant put out his arm to steady the swaying figure. "I am not drunk!"

This was in a sense true. Martino had taken just enough wine to make him ready for a brisk quarrel. And in those days, when every gentleman wore a sword as an everyday article of attire, a quarrel and a duel meant practically the same thing.

"HEART of my heart, *donna mia,* how can I endure the time which separates me from the joy of claiming you as my own? I must perforce count the laggard hours, slowly as a miser counts his gold; yet how gladly would I fling them like a spendthrift into the lap of Time, that my happiness might be crowned this very moment—with thy dear self!"

Sweet as distant music on a summer's breeze, seductive as the siren's song, cunningly tuned as the serpent tongue that beguiled the first sin, the creature known as Adonis di Luchio breathed the words into Lisalda's willing ear as they sat together in the *loggetta* overlooking the Grand Canal. From the adjacent ballroom came the sound of harps and viols playing a stately minuet. They had slipped away almost unnoticed after they had led off the first dance, the handsomest couple that trod the polished floor.

She lifted her shining eyes to his. Her lissom body swayed toward him like some glorious flower seeking the life-giving rays of the sun.

"Soon, my prince," she whispered. "It will be very soon."

He shook his head, frowning as he looked down on the gay panorama of pleasure that passed along the canal.

"Forty days!" he muttered moodily. "You know that no priest will celebrate a marriage during Lent? That condemns me to forty days in the barren wilderness of my thwarted passion. Forty days! How can I endure it? Every minute which keeps me from you will seem a century, every leaden hour an intolerable weight to drag me to despair!" He caught both her hands in his and drew her closer, so that she could feel the fierce throbbing of his heart. "But why *should* we endure the agony of waiting? Time was made for slaves; let us bid defiance to the hoary tyrant! Is not our love great enough to be a law unto itself? Are we to be harnessed to the narrow circle of convention, like wornout mules that plod their dull, everlasting round as they work a mill? No, by my father's kingdom!—a thousand times no!"

She drew back slightly.

"You swear by your father's kingdom," she said wonderingly. "Are you then a prince in very truth?"

"Aye, and of no mean domain!" he answered, a slight smile playing about his lips. "I have more subjects than any ruler on Earth, and every day adds to their number! But few men deny me their allegiance to my great army—the service is so pleasant, the promises so alluring.

Tell me, Lisalda, are you not all eager to behold my dazzling court?"

"I am, dear Luchio," she breathed between her slightly parted lips.

He sprang to his feet and caught her to his breast.

"Then come, my love!" he cried. "Enter with me into my kingdom this very night!"

"This very night?" she echoed in joyous amazement. "Is your kingdom so near at hand?"

He nodded, keeping his burning eyes fixed on hers.

"We will travel fast—on the wings of love," he assured her smoothly. "Say that you will come—now, this very minute! I have a gondola moored at the steps below. With my own hands I will row you beyond the outlying islands of the Lagoon, where my Barge of State, manned by a thousand lusty slaves, will meet us and bear you like an Empress to my domain. But you must come of your own free will, otherwise the pact is of no avail. Do you consent?"

For a moment she hesitated. Perhaps a warning instinct was stirred into life within her foolish heart by the passing breath from the wings of some merciful angel.

"If I come, will you promise never to forsake me?" she asked.

"I swear it!" he cried, turning his face away to hide the dreadful smile which accompanied his seemingly passionate avowal. "Never will I give you up—never, never! You will be mine—body and soul—mine for all eternity!"

He caught her up unresisting in his arms and turned toward the flight of marble steps which led down to the water's edge. But before he could gain them:

"Halt!" cried a hoarse, menacing voice, and Martino emerged from the shadow of one of the great pillars, his drawn sword held ready in his hand.

"So this is the faith that fiends keep with their dupes?" the young cavalier exclaimed bitterly. "I have heard your specious wooing. I have heard her fascinated consent. Little does she know the nature of the kingdom over which she is to rule! Little does she dream to what hideous, unbaptized image she has given her love!"

"Heed not this drunkard's mouthing," Luchio whispered to the girl. Aloud he said haughtily: "Stand aside, *Signor!*"

With a swift movement Martino raised the point of his weapon until it pointed directly at the other's throat.

"Release that lady, and I will spare the life you have usurped."

A loud, derisive laugh was Luchio's only answer.

"Be warned — I have you at my mercy," the cavalier went on. "But I am no hired bravo, that I must strike unawares. You wear a sword. Draw, and defend yourself!"

The *golem* laughed again.

"Then strike, Signor Martino, strike home well and true! You will find that I am well defended already!"

He made a step forward as he spoke and Martino lunged with all his strength at the unprotected throat.

But it was the attacker, not the attacked, who staggered back and fell groaning to the floor. A sensation like the pain of a numbing blow had shot up his right arm, paralyzing it from wrist to shoulder. The finely tempered blade had been shattered into fragments, as though struck by invisible lightning, the instant it had come into contact with the flesh of the demoniacal lover.

The next instant, unheeding the screams of the terrified girl, Luchio ran lightly down the steps to the waiting

gondola, leapt aboard with his lovely burden, and launched forth into the stream.

DAZED, and still trembling from the shock of that awful contact, Martino managed to draw himself to his feet and descend to the landing-stage. Luchio's gondola, easily distinguished by the fact that it was the only boat not decked with gaudy lanterns, had already dwindled to a mere speck far down the vista of the Grand Canal.

Martino beckoned to the group of gondoliers who lounged on the steps.

"Which man of you has the swiftest boat?" he asked breathlessly. "Answer quickly—it is a matter of life and death —*and more!*"

Two brawny men stepped forward. Martino recognized them as the light fell on their weather-beaten faces, and his heart gave a throb of relief. They were the redoubtable brothers who, piloting their double-oared boat, had carried off the prize three times in succession at the annual regatta.

"A hundred ducats for each of you if you overtake that dark gondola before it reaches the open sea," he promised as he flung himself on board.

The effect of his words was instantaneous, for the sum represented a veritable fortune to the frugal-living gondoliers. The men leapt to their posts, one forward and the other aft of the curtained cabin in which Martino sat. The light craft gathered speed under their powerful, practised strokes. Like an arrow it shot beneath the center arch of the Ponte Accademia, its expert pilots—to whom every current of the canals was as familiar as the lines of their own horny palms—hugging the north shore of the bend in order to get every advantage of the slack water.

"*Viva,* we gain on them!" shouted Jacopo, the elder brother, as the boat entered the last straight reach of the Grand Canal where it merges into the broader Canale di San Marco.

From here it was possible to see right down the waterway, past the swelling dome of La Salute, to where the arched façade of the Doge's palace fronted the lofty campanile on the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, about a quarter of a mile distant.

From this spot it is possible to reach the open sea by three routes; by bearing southeast along the Canale di San Marco, by following the Canale della Giudecca in the opposite direction, or by passing through a narrow canal to the south, the Canale della Grazia, which runs between the island of San Giorgio and the larger island of La Giudecca.

A breathless cheer came from Jacopo as the pursued gondola was seen to swerve suddenly and make direct for the entrance of the last-named canal.

"We cannot fail to overtake him now, *Signor,*" he called out in high delight. "The Grazia is shaped like a funnel with its broad end to the sea. At the narrow end he will find the tide running like a mill-race—against him! With our two oars to his one—our knowledge of the stream to his guesswork—only the Devil himself could help him to escape us now!"

Clutching the gunwale to steady himself—for they were cutting diagonally across the current now, and the water is not always placid in Venice—Martino stared ahead at the tiny, swift-moving bark which contained the girl whom he had leagued himself with the powers of darkness to possess.

Yes, they were gaining! The black hull loomed clearer, nearer! The thews and sinews of honest Jacopo and his brother were proving a match for the cunning of the fiend. When Luchio

steered under the lee of the island and disappeared from sight into the narrow mouth of the little canal, the pursuing gondola was barely twenty yards in his wake.

"Now ply your best, brothers!" Martino cried as their boat in its turn began to breast the confined, swift-running flood. "Make every ounce of weight tell. Row as you have never rowed before; for this night you are striving for a prize far greater than you have ever won!"

THE men needed no urging. Their long oars quivered like reeds under their mighty strokes. The water rose in a high wave on either side, and fell into curling foam as the sharp prow clove through it. Yet, in spite of their efforts, by the time they had urged the boat halfway down the canal, Luchio and his fair prize had already arrived at the farther end.

"Faster!" cried Martino, white to the lips and trembling with impotent rage. "Faster—or he will gain the open sea!"

"Per Bacco!" growled the old gondolier. "I thought we had him safe, but that young spark rows like the very Devil!"

But even as he cried the words the flying craft ahead lurched and staggered, and, as though by a miracle, lay motionless with its prow lifted clear of the water.

"He's struck a submerged sand-bank!" The oarsmen redoubled their flagging efforts as the elder uttered the glad cry. "He's fast aground. He can't escape us now, even if he were the foul fiend himself!"

Suddenly, as they neared their motionless and apparently helpless quarry, an appalling vision burst upon their sight. Out of the blackness that veiled the Adriatic, they saw a nebulous blur of blood-red haze, rising, taking visible form before their startled eyes.

And what a form! It was a great barge outlined in living fire, driven toward them by hundreds of groaning slaves, who labored at the red-hot oars, under the torturing lash of demons armed with whips of scorpions and hissing serpents. An intense heat radiated from that floating hell of horror, but it was the heat which torments rather than consumes. The waves that dashed against its glowing sides, though they seethed and bubbled, did not burst into steam and hide the apparition in a merciful mantle of vapor. It was the ship of Satan, lit by the infernal fire that is never quenched.

Martino's boatmen ceased rowing and shrank back in dismay.

"Mother of God defend us!" cried one. "Back!—turn back as you value your immortal soul!"

"Take courage, comrades. I carry an amulet that will protect us from all harm." Martino held out his left hand and pointed to the ring he wore. "This silver ring contains a holy relic—brought by a Crusader from the Holy Land. Take hold of your oars again, if you call yourselves Christian men, and help me save that poor soul yonder. See, the Demon Ship is bearing down on them! Once she is borne aboard, Lisalda will be lost for ever!"

Then ensued a race like some contest of a frenzied nightmare. The dark waters of the Adriatic were churned into eddying foam under the hundred oars of the ghostly galley. Nearer and nearer it swept, swift as a questing albatross.

Three men against the legions of Hell—it seemed that such a hopeless contest could have but one ending.

"My strength is spent!" gasped Jacopo.

The old man staggered, and the oar slipped from his failing grasp. But, stooping quickly, he drew a huge flint-

lock pistol from his long sea-boot and leveled it at Luchio as he stood, a derisive smile of triumph on his handsome face, drawn up to his full height on the stern of the stranded gondola.

"If mortal bullet can reach your heart——" he muttered, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

" 'Tis useless!" Martino snatched the weapon. "His hell-given life is proof against fire and steel alike. But this—this holy relic——"

He slipped the silver ring containing the precious fragment into the wide barrel of the pistol, rammed it firmly home against the powder and shot with which it was already loaded, and looked carefully to the priming in the pan.

Cocking the trigger, he raised the strangely charged weapon and took steady aim at the broad chest of the defiant Luchio.

"Merciful Heaven!" he breathed the prayer with trembling lips. "Lend thine aid that I may send this monster back to his native Hell!"

Low as the words were uttered, they reached the ears of the *golem* across the narrow space of sea which intervened. They caused the smile to vanish from his face as though it had been erased by an invisible hand. Did his devilish instinct tell him what was about to happen? Did the holy talisman within the pistol make its potency felt even before it had been driven into contact with his unhallowed flesh?

The thoughts flashed through Martino's mind even as he drew the sights into line with his target. He pressed the trigger; then every conscious thought was swamped in the wave of wonder that surged through his bewildered brain at the miracle which followed.

For, hard upon the crash of the explosion, Adonis di Luchio had given voice to a piercing shriek. He reeled blindly and lurched forward as he fell. But before his body touched the gondola's deck, a silent puff of blood-red flame enveloped it for an instant, causing it to crumple, shrink and dwindle. And when the flames dispersed there sprawled on the deck, in place of the comely youth, a hideous and grotesque figure of roughly molded wax.

At the same moment the demon galley sank hissing beneath the sea, and with the extinction of its spectral fires a great darkness descended on the surface of the waters.

But Martino could see the beautiful pale face looking up into his own as he snatched up the slender form and lifted it on board his own boat. He could hear his name uttered softly in a voice of nervous trembling, yet unmistakably Lisalda's. He could feel the warm, grateful kisses of the girl whom, at the eleventh hour, he had snatched from the unhallowed embraces of the Son of Satan.

"Tonight you have tested strength: you have tried your limbs and found them not wanting."

They Shall Rise

By AUGUST W. DERLETH and MARK SCHORER

A weird and uncanny tale—a goose-flesh story about a dissecting-laboratory in which the cadavers would not stay dead

SOMETIMES I have tried to tell this story, but I have always failed. Even when I knew that it was all over, when I found myself strapped on a cot in the university hospital, perfectly cognizant of my surroundings, with all those eager faces leaning toward me and Doctor Montague standing near me, urging me to speak, I could not. Thoughts and words were all a hopeless jumble, and I knew that what I was saying was but incoherent fragments of sentences, words without meaning. I *tried* to tell the story as it happened, and in my mind the whole thing was clear as day, but I could not say it. They thought I had lost my mind; for a while I, too, thought so. They gave me up as hopeless, in the end, and sent me home. They did not understand that men sometimes come through experiences so horrible that they are unable ever after to speak coherently of them. The last of that experience is now six months away, and I am going to write what I have never been able to say.

STAN ELSON and I were fourth year medics at the University of Wisconsin. One night last spring we had been working fairly late in a Science Hall

laboratory, and when we had finished, Stan had gone out before me. It was raining. Just as I came out of the door and started running down the steps toward him, Stan was coming back up.

"Where the devil have you been, Valens?" he asked, as I came up to him. "Why didn't you say it'd take you a while yet; I've been standing here in the rain, thinking you were on my heels. I might just as well have been inside."

"It was the most extraordinary thing, Stan. I wasn't more than eighty feet behind you—but, by the way, you must have passed the old boy."

"Passed whom?"

"The old man who stopped me in the hall. I'd just turned the corner to take the stairs and almost ran into him; a tall, pasty-faced individual, dressed in old-fashioned clothes—long black frock coat, muffler, beaver hat; carried an old green umbrella. You must have seen him."

Elson shook his head. "I saw no one."

"That's strange. I would have sworn that he passed you."

"He might have been in the building," said Elson a little sharply.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think he was," I said.

I put up the collar of my slicker and turned to walk at Elson's side. We descended to the road and started up Langdon Street. The rain came down in sheets on the asphalt and ran along the gutters in swift streams. I said nothing, thinking of the stranger I had seen in the corridor. Finally my silence grated on Stan.

"Well, what about him?" he said almost irritably; "the man in the hall."

"Oh, nothing exactly," I answered. "Struck me as rather queer, that's all. Asked to look over the dissection laboratories, and mumbled something about his interest in anatomical fields. His face hit me, though—so damned white; looked like a Frosh who'd stumbled into a lab by accident."

Elson chuckled. "What'd you tell him?"

"Said I didn't have any authority; for all of me he could go ahead. He was very grateful, and went. I repeated that I couldn't be held responsible if he were found there. He only smirked and thanked me again. I didn't like the look of that fellow at all."

"I wouldn't hold his looks against him," said Elson. "That's something none of us has much choice about."

"I was thinking about something I read recently," I began. Then I broke off and looked at Stan. "Have you read the *Cardinal* of late?"

Elson smiled. "Not since I was wearing the green, Valens. Why?"

"For the past few weeks it's been carrying some mighty odd articles. And I think that an old man, dressed in old-fashioned clothes, and carrying a green umbrella, was mixed up in most of them."

Elson stopped in the rain, grasping my arm abruptly. "Valens!" he exclaimed, "you don't mean those laboratory disturbances?"

"You've heard of them, then," I said. "There's been some strange talk."

"Those horrible things that started at Columbia, and spread to Harvard and Yale, and all the Eastern universities and colleges. And they've been hushed up considerably, too, if I'm any judge."

I nodded. "Yes. Two days ago they were at the University of Chicago, and at Northwestern, and at Illinois. Do you understand what that suggests?"

"Do you think——" began Elson, but I read his question and cut him off.

"Two were killed at Columbia, seven at Harvard, five at Yale, four at Princeton —need I go on? I know them all, and needless to say, I did not get most of my information from the papers because I

know that most of it was suppressed. Friends have written me most of it. Forty-seven students—medics—have died from mysterious causes since the trouble began in the East. Found cold and distorted, and no sign on them as to how they might have been killed! I've been watching the thing. And that's not all—it's not only in this country, but for years—for years, it's been all over the world! In 1873, at the University of Edinburgh. In 1880 at Guy's in London. Not five years later in Vienna, then the Sorbonne, Heidelberg, Bonn—all over the Continent, in all the major institutions for medical research. And now it has come to America."

Elson broke in. "But what's behind it?"

"I don't know, I'm going to try to find out!"

WE WALKED on in the rain, neither speaking. Then I began again, and I think I must have given away the repressed excitement I was feeling. "Do you know, Stan, I've seen that old man before, I think."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I haven't the remotest idea. But I'm going to look him up." I stopped suddenly, glancing abruptly at the row of houses along the street. I was about to say good-night to Elson, for we stood before the house in which I lived. Then I realized that I was without my notebook.

"Hell! Stan, I forgot my notebook."

"Don't need it tonight, do you?"

"I do. I've got to get up that back work. It's due tomorrow."

"Going back?"

"I'll have to, I'm afraid. Want to walk along?"

"Might as well. I haven't anything better to do."

We turned and started back up the wet street. The rain was still coming down. We had not gone far when we met two of our fellow-students who had been working in the laboratory when we had left it shortly before.

"Where to?" one of them asked.

"You didn't notice my notebook on my table, did you, Asham? I left it up there somewhere."

"Didn't see it. Everybody's gone now."

"Lab's not locked, is it?"

"Wasn't when we left. But we saw the janitor down the hall," said Dean, the younger of the two.

"We'll have to make it before he leaves," I said.

We went on up the street toward Science Hall, and Asham and Dean were lost in the rain.

"Suppose we'll meet your pale friend?" asked Elson.

"I don't know. The janitor has probably put him out if he's been wandering around the building in the fashion he was when I met him."

We mounted the stone steps leading up to Science Hall, and pulled open the heavy door. The dim hall lights of the building seemed to be the only ones burning. We started up the first of the five flights we had to climb, when, looking up suddenly, we saw the old man with the umbrella standing motionless before us.

"Hello!" I cried. "Find the laboratories all right?"

The fixed smile on the man's dead white face gave place to a frown. "No, no," he said in a soft voice. "I have changed my mind."

"We're going up now," offered Elson. "Don't you want to come up with us?"

"No, no. Thank you. I will return in the morning." He eyed us closely and brushed past down the stairs. His footsteps fell heavily, echoing in the stillness. Elson and I turned and followed him with our eyes

"Funny way of walking," observed Elson.

"Like a machine," I suggested.

The retreating figure of the old man disappeared in the hall below. We heard the great outer door close after him.

"Well, let's go on," said Elson.

We had just started up the stairs again when a voice behind us called loudly, "Where to, boys?" Once more we turned. It was the janitor.

"Oh, I left my notebook in 500. I've got to have it. We were only going up to get it."

"Well, I'm just going up there to lock up. I'll go with you."

The janitor joined us, and we went slowly up the five flights of steps. At last we came to the door of Room 500. Asham and Dean, the last to leave, had apparently turned off the lights, for all was dark. But the door was unlocked, and for a moment I fancied I heard a stealthy movement within. Then I opened the door and turned on the lights.

For a minute I noticed nothing; then, abruptly, I stopped dead in my path across the room to my table, feeling the blood rush from my face.

"Stan! Mr. Brown!" I called, without moving.

The two came running into the room.

"My God!" cried Elson.

The janitor stood speechless, his mouth open.

There before us were four cadavers, propped into peculiarly life-like positions, stiff and rigid, their opened eyes staring glassily before them. One of them was seated, his dead fingers gripped tightly on the arms of the chair. Another leaned against the wall, his knees bent, as if he would fall in another moment. Yet he did not fall. The other two were perhaps the most horrible. They sat on the edge of a table, side by side, as students sit when resting from their work; but on the faces of these dead things were utterly shocking expressions—expressions not at all like those of people long dead, long preserved, but rather like those of people newly dead. Their lips were lifted above their teeth in frightful, unspeakably horrible leers.

The janitor was the first to find his voice. "This is Asham's idea of a good joke," he said.

"Nonsense!" I snapped. "No medical student would do anything like this. This is *not* our idea of a good joke. It's some outsider, someone else." And all the time I was thinking: this happened in Europe, in the East, at Illinois, Northwestern, Chicago. And now here. . . .

"I'm going to call Doctor Montague," said the janitor, making for the door. "You two wait," he called back.

Elson looked at me, incredulity on his face. "What does it mean?" he whispered.

I shook my head. "I don't know. But I do know that it wasn't Asham and Dean." I turned quickly from Elson and the scene before us, determined to forget the horrible suggestions that rushed into my mind.

Elson said, "It's lucky the 'stiff float' wasn't open. No telling what might have happened if it had been."

I nodded in agreement. A shudder of horror passed through my body at the thought. In a moment more the janitor was back in the room.

"This yours?" he asked curtly, picking up a notebook from my table. I went forward and took it from him. "Doctor Montague will be down in a little while. You boys want to wait? If not, you can go."

"Let's go," suggested Elson hurriedly.

I pulled myself together. "Yes, I've got to finish this work tonight."

Together we left the room. Maddening thoughts pushed themselves into my mind.

HALF of the four-hour laboratory period was over next morning before the whispered discussions of a *Cardinal* news-story about mysterious disturbances in Laboratory 500 during the previous night had died down. Finally, however, students were once more settling down to work. I was busy at my table, working at Stan's side, when suddenly I saw the door of the room slowly pushed open.

In the broad light of day now, we saw the old man with the umbrella and the pasty face. He was in the act of removing an antiquated beaver hat from his head. From behind square-rimmed spectacles, strange hollow eyes looked curiously into the room. He walked forward a few steps, somewhat uncertainly, moving his tall thin body with short, jerky steps, not unlike those of an automaton. Then suddenly he was speaking to the student nearest the door, in a strikingly repulsive and hollowly gelatinous sort of bass voice. "Would you be so kind as to direct me to Doctor Montague?"

The student to whom he had spoken whirled around on hearing his voice. He backed instinctively away before this strangely repellent man, this man who, though he looked to be fifty, yet gave forth an impression of much greater age, age that could not be put into convincing numbers. "Over there," murmured the student finally, pointing to Doctor Montague, who stood near the table at which I was working with Elson.

The old man approached the professor with the same short, uncertain steps. Doctor Montague looked up.

"You are Professor Montague? You are head of the courses in anatomy here at Wisconsin?"

What a peculiar accent! flashed into my mind.

"Yes, I am Doctor Montague," replied the professor.

"My name is Brock, Doctor Septimus Brock. My practise is in Scotland, though now I am touring your splendid country. As my interests are in medical research, I have naturally been seeking out those places in America which further such work." He indicated the laboratory with a sweep of his hand. "I wonder if it would be possible for me to examine your different laboratories?"

Professor Montague, who had been eyeing his visitor with undisguised curiosity, came to himself suddenly, saying, "Certainly, Doctor Brock; let me call a guard to show you around."

"Thank you, Professor."

Elson and I had been standing at our table listening intently to this short conversation. The sudden appearance of an assistant sent both of us quickly to work. Elson, however, who was by nature nervous, in turning so suddenly to his cadaver and attempting to resume his work casually, as if nothing had happened, quite accidentally severed the tongue in the head of his specimen.

Then something unaccountably strange occurred. The man with the umbrella, who had apparently observed the accident, jumped at once to Elson's side. He looked at him sharply and said in a cold voice, "You deface the dead!" There was a surprizing malevolence in his glance, which escaped neither Elson nor me.

Elson, who was at once thoroughly upset, began to explain. "I'm sorry. I assure you, it was purely accidental."

Professor Montague, who had been observing as well, said with a casual gesture, "It's all right, Elson. Accidents will happen."

He turned to the man at his side. "Your comment about defacing the dead,

Doctor Brock, seems to me somewhat strange coming from a medical man."

The old man pulled himself up and made a careless motion with the hand that gripped the green umbrella. "Of course, Doctor Montague. I am losing the scientific attitude, I fear. It seemed needlessly careless."

Doctor Montague nodded shortly. A guard had come forward at a motion from him. "Your guard, Doctor Brock. I hope you will find the laboratories of sufficient interest to justify your visit. Please order the guard about at your pleasure."

"Thank you, Doctor Montague. You are kind indeed." With that he turned to the guard and spoke to him in a voice that could not be overheard. But in a moment the guard was leading the way to the short corridor leading to a group of smaller laboratories.

Then, for the second time that morning, something strange happened.

It was Elson who first noticed it. "Look at Dean!" he whispered excitedly to me.

I looked up. Dean, a pale and very sensitive young man, stood staring at the approaching Doctor Brock, his eyes wide and fixed. It flashed into my mind that something had powerfully upset him, for I had seen him react to strong mental stimuli, hypnotic stimuli, before. Dean had evidently been at work, for he still held tightly to a large dissecting-knife. The doctor passed his table with the guard, never once looking at Dean; the student turned his whole body and continued to regard our visitor with that unnatural stare.

Then suddenly it happened. Dean's hand shot up, and, as if the arm had been loosed by a powerful spring, the knife went flying at the doctor's back. It lodged there, thudding against his back with a horrible dull sound. Dean screamed suddenly and collapsed limply in his chair.

Then his voice rang hysterically through the laboratory—"I couldn't help it, I couldn't! I had to do it!" He put his head on his arms and began to sob wildly.

But strangest of all was the attitude of Doctor Brock. He turned calmly around, apparently not noticing the affected student nor the rest of us standing aghast. He reached behind him and drew away the knife just as Doctor Montague ran forward.

"What's wrong?"

Doctor Brock smiled his characteristic fixed smile. "Nothing at all," he said suavely. "Fortunately, it lodged in my clothing." He held the knife in his hand. It was as clean and spotless as it had been when Dean so suddenly threw it!

Doctor Montague took in the situation at a glance. "Buck up, Dean!" He clutched the student by the shoulder. "You'd better come along with me. Sorry this happened, Doctor Brock. I hope it hasn't disturbed you unduly."

"Not at all," replied the old man, and turned abruptly to the guard. "Shall we go on?"

Leaning on the professor's arm, Dean left the room, while Doctor Brock and his guard went on down the corridor. There was an excited babble among the students.

Elson turned to me in great agitation. "My God, I thought Dean got him!"

"I'd have sworn that knife went six inches into his back!" I said, grasping Elson's wrist suddenly, holding it tight in my hand. I could feel myself trembling.

Turning simultaneously, we saw the guard unlocking the metal-barred door to the "stiff" room, where all the cadavers of the medical school lined the walls and floated in the great preserving-vat.

THAT night, at my request, Elson came to my room. I was sitting at my desk before a row of heavy medical books, a lamp with a green glass shade bent close to the open book through which I was leafing. Elson sat in a deep chair in the gray darkness at the side of my desk, lost almost entirely in shadows, his eyes watching me. I closed the book suddenly and turned to him. "I *know* I've seen him somewhere. If it's a picture I saw, I'm almost positive it's in one of my books. I haven't used the library at all this year, nor during most of the last."

I pulled another book down before me —an out-of-print medical encyclopedia— and again went quickly through the pages.

"Got him," I said. "Come here, Stan."

Elson rose and came over to the desk. He leaned over my shoulder, and together we read: "Brock, Septimus Asa, M. D., born, 1823, Duncardin, Scotland. Unmarried. Educated at University of Edinburgh. Set up small practise there, and practised for about four years, during which time he wrote and published two small pamphlets and a monograph: *The Dead: How Shall We Regard Them?; A Treatise on the Horror of Dissection;* and *When the Soul Has Gone, Shall the Body Die?* These three works, especially the latter, though now out of print, were regarded as the product of a deranged mind, and after an examination, Doctor Brock was incarcerated in Denham Asylum for the Insane. From this asylum he disappeared in 1872, his disappearance being made doubly mysterious by the fact that he was at the time on his death-bed, and was certainly too weak to walk. He was never again heard from, and it is assumed that he met his death shortly after his miraculous escape. Doctor Brock's case is mentioned as one of the world's most startling disappearances."

Elson looked down at me. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I don't want to guess at it, but I think I'm beginning to see."

"This man with the green umbrella——"

"I have seen him before," I cut in, "or his picture. It was probably his picture. And I think it was in his monograph, *When the Soul Has Gone, Shall the Body Die?* which I think I have on file somewhere."

"Where?" asked Elson, interested now.

I motioned toward a file close to the wall in the darkness where he had been sitting, but I made no move to go toward it.

Elson said, "Why don't you get it?"

Suddenly, inexplicably, I shuddered. A most peculiar feeling came over me abruptly, an odd feeling of fear, of warning, telling me not to go on. I turned quickly to Stan, explaining that sudden sensation.

"Nonsense!" he cut in sharply. "Your imagination's working on your nerves, old man."

I CAME to my feet with an effort and went stiffly to the file. There I pulled open the top drawer, and my fingers began to go swiftly through the miscellaneous papers it contained. The monograph was not there, nor was it in the second. It was half hidden in the third drawer, where I found it only when I went over the papers a second time. I drew it out hurriedly and brought it over to the desk, putting it down in the green glow of the desk lamp.

On the cover under the title there was a dim, poorly reproduced picture of a man with square-rimmed glasses, and the man was terrifyingly like the doctor who had visited the laboratory that morning, was indeed the same man, if I were any

judge. Yet that would place his age above one hundred years!

I sat down slowly, put out a hesitant hand, and turned the first two pages of the monograph. I was not eager to read what was printed therein. The text seemed to leap out at me, its first words flung across the page in heavy blackface. *"There is a use in life for bodies from which the soul has gone!"*

Elson laughed unconvincingly. "How awkwardly he points out their use for anatomical purpose!" he said.

I looked at him. "Do you think so, Stan?"

"Don't you?"

I closed the monograph suddenly; once again I shuddered. "No," I said. "I don't. I remember this thing now—very distinctly."

"Old man, I think something's the matter with you," said Elson quickly. "Do you think a shot of gin would do us any good? You're making me feel whatever it is you're feeling."

Impatiently, I brushed the suggestion aside. "A paper on the power of animation which certain little known aspects of black magic have over dead bodies. And there is something about ways in which the soul can be driven from a living body and the body kept animate." I was talking more to myself than to Elson, but suddenly, looking closely at my friend, I said, "Was he mad, do you think?"

"Mad as a hatter," said Elson quickly.

I went on, "He disappeared, they said, but he was never really found; they never recovered his body."

"No, no, not that," said Elson suddenly, his face revealing the feeling of terror suddenly gripping him. "The man could not be Brock. He'd be over a hundred years old. You don't know what you're suggesting."

But I was not listening. Could it be—was it possible that he had animated himself?

"Listen," I murmured abruptly, taking Stan's arm; "he wrote something about dead bodies rising against the living through the power of this weird hypnotic influence, great masses of dead rising."

Once more I turned to the monograph, leafing rapidly through it, stopping on the last page. *" 'I shall return, and lay hands upon them, and they shall become animate. And they shall rise in great numbers, they shall rise up against those who have defaced them, against those who have defiled their bodies for other men. They shall rise against all the living, and weapons shall be powerless against them. And they shall sweep over all the earth, slaying and destroying, and I shall be their lord and master; for without me, without the power that shall emanate from me, they die and shall be for ever dead. O dead, look for the day! I shall come, and you shall rise against the living!' "*

Elson shook my arm almost roughly. "That's madness! It's the raving of a madman!"

I put my hands on the table to steady myself. Elson went on, urgently, "Let's drop this stuff, Valens. We've still got our notebooks to get up tonight, remember. We've set this night to finish the job."

I nodded. "Of course," I said. "I'd forgotten. We'd better hurry to the lab—it's almost nine now."

Elson was at the same time relieved and uneasy. I think he thought for a moment that I had let my nerves get the better of me, and felt glad at the same time that he had kept his own imagination so well under control. Yet he was oddly uneasy about returning to the laboratory, that same laboratory where Doctor Septimus Brock had walked that morning. He shrugged his shoulders and

said nothing, fearing, no doubt, that he would excite me again.

WE ENTERED the laboratory with some trepidation, though neither of us showed his uneasiness. We went to work immediately, and yet felt not in the least like working, nor did we work particularly rapidly. After a while, Elson leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Ten o'clock," I told him, looking at my watch.

"On this dissection of the heart, do you have——"

"Listen!" I said, breaking into his sentence. I had heard something.

"What's the matter?"

"Stan, didn't you hear a noise just then?"

"No."

"As if someone were talking, far away?"

"Not a thing. Valens, you'd better watch your nerves."

"Yes. That must be it." I shuddered.

Elson turned again to his notebook, keeping an eye on me still. "In this dissection of the heart," he began again, "do you have a cross of the left auricular——"

"Listen!" I said again, tense now, my body rigid in the chair.

There *was* a sound, and both of us heard it. And we were alone in the laboratory, alone on the floor. Someone was talking in a deep voice, but the voice seemed to come from a great distance, away on the campus perhaps, or in a vault below the buildings; yet there was a curiously terrifying quality in the deep tones coming to us in the somber stillness. And there was an additional sound, a confused pattering, soft yet distinct, as if many people were running bare-footed here and there on a hard floor.

"Do you hear it?" I asked quickly.

Elson nodded. "I hear it. But where is it? And what is it?"

I got up and walked slowly toward the door that opened on the locked and barred "stiff" room. I pressed my ear to the metal. Then as I turned to Elson I felt the blood drain from my face. My lips opened, trembling, eager to speak, but no sounds came. I had heard something within; those mysterious noises had come from behind the door to the "stiff" room. Elson came toward me, but I motioned him away. Abruptly I spoke in a horror-strangled voice, and I felt the grotesque impression I made on Stan. "It's in there—the stiffs—someone talking—walking on bare feet!"

I broke away from the door, breathing heavily.

Elson said, "We'll get the janitor. I'll get him. Someone ought to be here."

I shook my head. "No, no," I murmured. "No one else, Stan. No one would believe us, and besides, I think we can handle this better ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"No one else knows about Doctor Brock and that monograph."

Elson made an uneasy movement with his head. "What shall we do?" he asked.

"We've got to get a look into that room—whatever it is in there must not see us, must not know we are here. That means we can't try the door."

"There's another dissecting-room upstairs, over the float. There's a panel in the floor. Perhaps we can look down through that?"

"Have you got a flashlight, Stan?"

"In my locker."

Elson went to his locker and brought out a pocket flashlight that he kept there. With this, we found our way through the now darkened hall of the building and up the wide stairs. The sounds we had heard in the laboratory were silent now, but when we had reached the floor above,

when we had crossed the threshold of the dissecting-room and were standing directly above the float-room, we heard again the deep, eery voice, but now the footsteps had stopped. I directed the light to the floor and moved it slowly to the center of the room, and then, in the compass of the ray, we saw the panel. We walked silently over and came down on our knees beside it. The voice was clear now, and the more clear it became, the more weird it grew—a chillingly hollow voice, a voice of deep yet flat tones, thrilling us with horror. It was saying something we could not understand, and every now and then there would be answers in chorus.

I LAID the flashlight on the floor and we pressed our ears to the panel. Still the words were not clear, yet some of them came: ". . . defiled, abused . . . long have I been in coming . . . but I am come . . . others waited to feel my power calling to them again; once they, too, felt it, as you feel it . . . now. Tonight you have tasted strength; you have tried your limbs and found them not wanting . . . some have suspected, but they have died . . . our purpose is lost if I am gone, for in me lies the power that will raise you to the heights."

"This is madness," murmured Elson, his face strained, white.

"Not madness," I whispered guardedly; "worse—sorcery, black sorcery!"

The droning voice below went on. "Over all Europe they have felt my touch . . . they are waiting now for the call which I shall send out through space . . . and they shall rise up in great numbers and destroy . . . and death is powerless against them."

My fingers crept silently over the panel, seeking to push it open. The crevice in the floor broadened into a slit-like opening. I opened it no more than six inches; then both of us bent our heads over the aperture. Excited babble came from below, and by the light of the flash reflected dimly from the surface of the stiff-float below, we saw a crowd of dripping nude bodies, leaning eagerly forward, pressing around a fully clothed man who stood in their midst. The man was Doctor Septimus Brock, and the others . . . those others . . . had until today been floating in the now empty vats!

"Get that light out!" I growled.

Elson's fingers closed on the flashlight; it slipped, thudded to the floor. In that instant, below us, the head of Septimus Brock was suddenly thrown back, glassy eyes staring upward, an arm half raised to shield his face. We drew back. *Had he seen us?*

The light was out now, and I quickly pushed the panel to. We rose and crept silently from the room, the flash throwing its ray before us as we went down the stairs, into our own laboratory, where we took our notebooks, and out into the street. Neither of us spoke until we were well up Langdon Street.

"I'm not sure," Elson said at last, "exactly what he's aiming at."

"Wait," I told him. "That pamphlet tells it. I'll show you."

IN MY room once more, I took up the monograph and turned to Elson. "His general theory is that he has a power which enables him to animate dead bodies for his own use, and against these bodies no ordinary weapon has any power. I feel that his is a hypnotic power self-induced with the aid of sorcery, of which he seems to have been a student. His intention is simply to organize the dead of the world—and what better place to recruit them than dissecting-laboratories? — but it is necessary for him first to establish contact with them, or else he can have no future power over them. That is why he has taken so long, so many years since his

escape from the asylum. He is looking forward to the day when the dead shall rise against the living, sent into the world to destroy, through his power."

"But his motive?" demanded Elson. "He's mad, raving mad!"

"The motive is here, too," I went on, everything suddenly clear now, and my thoughts collected after that last tremendous shock in the laboratories. I read from the monograph: " 'Men have called me mad. Even now there are some who contemplate my incarceration in an asylum. I am fully aware of all this. I wait for it, for my revenge on society will be more terrible, more awful, with this injustice rankling in my breast. For I, Septimus Brock, have power to give life to the dead. I shall give them life, and there will come a day when they shall rise up against the society which has looked upon my work as that of a madman, against the society which has mutilated and defiled those who have died!' "

"My God!" Elson murmured in a strangled voice, clutching me by the arm. "The way he looked at me yesterday when I cut out that tongue! The way he looked at me! . . ."

I WAS rudely awakened next morning by someone shaking me.

"Awake, Valens?" I heard.

I pulled myself up, yawning, and nodded.

It was Stan. He was speaking.

"Remember yesterday morning, Valens? . . . that guard . . . Septimus Brock?"

I nodded again, only half understanding. As I took the paper from Elson I saw that it was that morning's *Cardinal*. Stan had marked a small paragraph on an inner page, circling it in heavy black crayon:

It is reported that Henry Petersen, a guard in the Science department, did not return home last night. Inquiries have brought no response. Anyone knowing of the possible whereabouts of Henry Petersen will please communicate at once with John Petersen, through the *Cardinal*.

Elson was looking at me inquiringly.

I said, hurriedly, "It was Petersen with Brock yesterday morning—Petersen went into the stiff-room with Brock. Did he come out?"

Elson shook his head. "I didn't see him."

"Nor I." I paused, took up the paper, and looked at it again. "And I didn't see Brock come out either," I added.

Elson fidgeted. "Valens, did we see people in the stiff-room last night? Or was it, do you think, our imagination?"

I looked at him. "What do *you* think?"

I jumped from my bed before he could answer, and began to dress, leaving Elson agape near the bureau.

I turned to him abruptly and said, "Listen, Stan, I'm not coming to lab this morning. I've got something else to do—something more important."

"May I know what it is?"

Should I tell Elson? I wondered. Then I said, "Only a silver bullet has any power against black magic, I understand." I was trying to speak matter-of-factly. "I am definitely curious to know how a silver bullet would affect Doctor Brock."

I was gone before Elson could say another word.

IT WAS already quite late that night when I returned to my room and found the note that Elson had left for me. I took it up and read:

Brock was in the lab again this morning. Doc Montague told me he had asked about us, asking especially about "that student who had cut the tongue yesterday". Call me when you come in.

I read the note a second time, musingly, my hand straying unconsciously to my coat pocket, caressing the revolver hidden there. Then I went to the telephone and called Elson's number. A strange voice answered me—certainly not Elson's.

"This Asham?" I ventured.

"Yes. Who's calling?"

"Valens. Where's Stan?"

"He went out after he got your note."

I started. "My note? What's that? Repeat that, Asham."

"I said he went out after he got your note. Just a minute."

There was a sound suggesting that Asham had left the telephone. What was this about a note from me? Good God, was it perhaps . . . I thought quickly of something I had heard in that half-real conversation from the stiff-room the night before — "Some have suspected — they have died!" But Asham was back, reading:

" 'Stan, come pronto to 500 Science Hall. I've struck something.' — Didn't you send that, Valens? There's a 'V' or something at the bottom, like a signature."

I said, "I always sign notes to Stan like that, but I sent him no note tonight. You're sure that came tonight?"

"Positive. Say, Valens, there's nothing wrong, is there? You know, Stan's been acting sort of queer, and I thought maybe —you know, a fellow can't help thinking, Valens."

I dropped the receiver, pushing the telephone away from me. There was no time to lose. Something had gone wrong. I ran from the house, and began to tear down Langdon Street toward Science Hall, rearing itself upward at its end.

The hall was dark, save for a faint illumination from the window of laboratory room number 500. I slunk silently into the building, paused to listen for sounds, and not hearing any, went softly along, up the stairs, one flight, two, holding my breath at each creak of the stairs. There was no light in the hall on the top floor. I paused uncertainly. Should I go on? There was no telling what I might encounter. The feeling of the revolver and the memory of the silver bullet reassured me. I went on.

A dark figure loomed up suddenly beside the door to room 500. For an instant I drew back, then came forward again. It was Elson. I went on, more quickly now.

"Stan," I whispered, "thank God you're all right! What's up?"

ELSON did not answer. He put his finger to his lips, signing for silence. I came up to him.

"Nothing the matter, is there?" I asked, suddenly suspicious once more.

Elson waved one hand before him for silence, still pressing his finger to his colorless lips. Terror suddenly possessed me. I slipped my hand into my pocket, feeling the revolver close to my skin. Elson's face was so white, his eyes so unnaturally glassy, expressionless, as if he were dazed from a horrible fright.

Then he put his hand suddenly on the knob of the door, indicating with his head that I should precede him. Still facing him, I edged through the partly open door. Then, just as I had crossed the threshold, I saw through Elson's half-parted lips, saw a cavity which brought to me abruptly a terrifying vision of a tongueless cadaver, and two fierce blazing eyes boring at Elson from beneath a shock of white hair and an old beaver hat. God, what had happened to Elson . . . his tongue?

Instantly warned, I whirled. Before me I saw what seemed to be an endless host of cadavers, and at their head a tall frock-coated figure — Doctor Brock. I understood. They had lured Elson here, to punish him for mutilating his cadaver, to set him up as an example for the rest of the world. . . . Then Elson was . . . not living . . . yet he walked! There was a slow movement toward me, the doctor smiling malevolently, hissing something

at me. I felt what had been Elson advancing from behind, and in that moment I lunged forward, grasping the wrist of the living dead man before me. At the same instant I pulled the trigger in my pocket, saw in a fleeting glance a frozen expression of terror on that malignant dead face peering into my own, and, amid the sounds of falling bodies dinning into my semi-conscious ears, there rose the welcome sound of quick-running footsteps on the stairs beyond. Then I knew no more, save an overwhelming blackness that pressed upon me from all sides.

I OPENED my eyes on the grim face of Doctor Montague, bending over the bed to which I was strapped. My ears were hearing a voice, my own voice, coming from far away:

". . . lured him there, killed him . . . driving the soul from his body by their magic . . . Brock's black sorcery. . . . But now they shall never rise . . . never, that hellish throng . . . he is dead for ever."

I saw Doctor Montague's face grow anxious. His voice came, suddenly; he was speaking to someone else. "Give me the paper, please; I want to see whether there is any reaction."

I knew Doctor Montague, and I wanted to say, "Hello, Doc," but somehow I couldn't. They held a paper before me, but it did not register—it meant nothing to me. Again I heard my voice, clearer now, strained, trying to tell them coherently what had happened. I thought I spoke clearly enough, but I must only have babbled nonsense. Yet—did I?

There were four days in that hospital, four days during which my brain burned with the knowledge it possessed, a knowledge that my tongue could not release despite my awful desire to tell them everything. At last they sent me home.

Even now they say I am mad; yet they have never made an attempt to explain what happened. Nor have the papers. The cadavers were disturbed, said the papers; but surely they must have seen that all the cadavers had been taken from the "stiff" room by someone, that they had been standing in 500 before they were found collapsed on the floor? Surely they must have seen this? And why did they not explain the finding of the corpse of Henry Petersen, stripped of its clothing, among those others? They told of the finding of Stan's body, of the cutting away of his tongue. How they had been killed, they did not know. There were no signs of external injury.

Asham had pursued me, and found me there, the papers said; I was raving incoherently, in my hand a revolver from which one chamber had been emptied, and in one of the tables a silver bullet had been found embedded. Why did no one guess at the significance of the silver bullet?

And why did they touch so lightly on the most damning facts of all? *The distinct brownish dust on the floor near me, the odor of age-old decay, the fragments of old clothes, of a pair of antiquated square spectacles, and the remains of an old umbrella; and finally that conclusive evidence in my own hand, clenched tightly even in my delirium, the wrist and hand bones which were too old to have come from the laboratory itself!*

The Hour of the Dragon

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stirring and vivid weird novel about a barbarian adventurer who made himself king, and the strange talismanic jewel that was known as the Heart of Ahriman

The Story Thus Far

CONAN, a barbarian adventurer who has made himself king of Aquilonia, finds himself pitted against Xaltotun, an ancient sorcerer and adept of black magic who has been dead for three thousand years. The priests who poisoned Xaltotun had mummified his body, keeping all his organs intact. He is revived by means of a flaming jewel, known as the Heart of Ahriman, which had been stolen from the wizard during his life.

With Xaltotun's aid, the conspirators who had brought him back from death place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia and invade Conan's kingdom. Xaltotun causes the cliffs to fall on Conan's army and captures Conan with the aid of his dark arts. Valerius, one of the conspirators, ascends the throne of Aquilonia, and Conan is mourned as dead.

Conan, rescued from Xaltotun's dungeons of horror by a girl of the king's seraglio who has fallen in love with him, escapes to Aquilonia and attempts to rally his followers; but they fear Xaltotun's magic too much. Meanwhile King Tarascus, alarmed by the growing power of the sorcerer Xaltotun, steals from him the Heart of Ahriman and sends one of his followers to throw the dread jewel into the sea.

By a heroic feat Conan rescues the Countess Albiona from the headsman's ax in the Iron Tower, and is aided in making his escape by the weird priests of Asura, whom he had befriended when he was king. Leaving the countess in safe hands, he starts for the coast, alone, in pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman. The jewel changes hands several times, and finally is taken aboard a Stygian galley by a priest of Stygia. Conan is set upon by hired assassins, and left for dead on the beach.

Shanghaied onto a pirate galley, Conan leads a mutiny and takes the ship southward in pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman. After a number of weird, blood-chilling adventures in Khemi, chief seaport of Stygia, Conan returns to his pirate ship and orders full sail to the northward for a quick return to Aquilonia, where he will try to wrest the throne from the usurping king, Valerius.

The story continues:

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21. *Out of the Dust Shall Acheron Arise*

WINTER had passed from Aquilonia. Leaves sprang out on the limbs of trees, and the fresh grass smiled to the touch of the warm southern breezes. But many a field lay idle and empty, many a charred heap of ashes marked the spot where proud villas or prosperous towns had stood. Wolves prowled openly along the grass-grown highways, and bands of gaunt, masterless men slunk through the forests. Only in Tarantia was feasting and wealth and pageantry.

Valerius ruled like one touched with madness. Even many of the barons who

This story began in WEIRD TALES for December

"Look, black devil of Python!"

had welcomed his return cried out at last against him. His tax-gatherers crushed rich and poor alike; the wealth of a looted kingdom poured into Tarantia, which became less like the capital of a realm than the garrison of conquerors in a conquered land. Its merchants waxed rich, but it was a precarious prosperity; for none knew when he might be accused of treason on a trumped-up charge, and his property confiscated, himself cast into prison or brought to the bloody block.

Valerius made no attempt to conciliate his subjects. He maintained himself by means of the Nemedian soldiery and by desperate mercenaries. He knew himself to be a puppet of Amalric. He knew that he ruled only on the sufferance of the Nemedian. He knew that he could never hope to unite Aquilonia under his rule and cast off the yoke of his masters, for the outland provinces would resist him to the last drop of blood. And for that matter the Nemedians would cast him from his throne if he made any attempt to consolidate his kingdom. He was caught in his own vise. The gall of defeated pride corroded his soul, and he

threw himself into a reign of debauchery, as one who lives from day to day, without thought or care for tomorrow.

Yet there was subtlety in his madness, so deep that not even Amalric guessed it. Perhaps the wild, chaotic years of wandering as an exile had bred in him a bitterness beyond common conception. Perhaps his loathing of his present position increased this bitterness to a kind of madness. At any event he lived with one desire: to cause the ruin of all who associated with him.

He knew that his rule would be over the instant he had served Amalric's purpose; he knew, too, that so long as he continued to oppress his native kingdom the Nemedian would suffer him to reign, for Amalric wished to crush Aquilonia into ultimate submission, to destroy its last shred of independence, and then at last to seize it himself, rebuild it after his own fashion with his vast wealth, and use its men and natural resources to wrest the crown of Nemedia from Tarascus. For the throne of an emperor was Amalric's ultimate ambition, and Valerius knew it. Valerius did not know whether Tarascus suspected this, but he knew that the king of Nemedia approved of his ruthless course. Tarascus hated Aquilonia, with a hate born of old wars. He desired only the destruction of the western kingdom.

And Valerius intended to ruin the country so utterly that not even Amalric's wealth could ever rebuild it. He hated the baron quite as much as he hated the Aquilonians, and hoped only to live to see the day when Aquilonia lay in utter ruin, and Tarascus and Amalric were locked in hopeless civil war that would as completely destroy Nemedia.

He believed that the conquest of the still defiant provinces of Gunderland and Poitain and the Bossonian marches would mark his end as king. He would then have served Amalric's purpose, and could be discarded. So he delayed the conquest of these provinces, confining his activities to objectless raids and forays, meeting Amalric's urges for action with all sorts of plausible objections and postponements.

His life was a series of feasts and wild debauches. He filled his palace with the fairest girls of the kingdom, willing or unwilling. He blasphemed the gods and sprawled drunken on the floor of the banquet hall wearing the golden crown, and staining his royal purple robes with the wine he spilled. In gusts of blood-lust he festooned the gallows in the market square with dangling corpses, glutted the axes of the headsmen and sent his Nemedian horsemen thundering through the land pillaging and burning. Driven to madness, the land was in a constant upheaval of frantic revolt, savagely suppressed. Valerius plundered and raped and looted and destroyed until even Amalric protested, warning him that he would beggar the kingdom beyond repair, not knowing that such was his fixed determination.

But while in both Aquilonia and Nemedia men talked of the madness of the king, in Nemedia men talked much of Xaltotun, the masked one. Yet few saw him on the streets of Belverus. Men said he spent much time in the hills, in curious conclaves with surviving remnants of an old race: dark, silent folk who claimed descent from an ancient kingdom. Men whispered of drums beating far up in the dreaming hills, of fires glowing in the darkness, and strange chantings borne on the winds, chantings and rituals forgotten centuries ago except as meaningless formulas mumbled beside mountain hearths in villages whose inhabitants differed strangely from the people of the valleys.

The reason for these conclaves none

knew, unless it was Orastes, who frequently accompanied the Pythonian, and on whose countenance a haggard shadow was growing.

But in the full flood of spring a sudden whisper passed over the sinking kingdom that woke the land to eager life. It came like a murmurous wind drifting up from the south, waking men sunk in the apathy of despair. Yet how it first came none could truly say. Some spoke of a strange, grim old woman who came down from the mountains with her hair flowing in the wind, and a great gray wolf following her like a dog. Others whispered of the priests of Asura who stole like furtive phantoms from Gunderland to the marches of Poitain, and to the forest villages of the Bossonians.

However the word came, revolt ran like a flame along the borders. Outlying Nemedian garrisons were stormed and put to the sword, foraging parties were cut to pieces; the west was up in arms, and there was a different air about the rising, a fierce resolution and inspired wrath rather than the frantic despair that had motivated the preceding revolts. It was not only the common people; barons were fortifying their castles and hurling defiance at the governors of the provinces. Bands of Bossonians were seen moving along the edges of the marches: stocky, resolute men in brigandines and steel caps, with longbows in their hands. From the inert stagnation of dissolution and ruin the realm was suddenly alive, vibrant and dangerous. So Amalric sent in haste for Tarascus, who came with an army.

In the royal palace in Tarantia the two kings and Amalric discussed the rising. They had not sent for Xaltotun, immersed in his cryptic studies in the Nemedian hills. Not since that bloody day in the valley of the Valkia had they called upon him for aid of his magic, and he had drawn apart, communing but little with them, apparently indifferent to their intrigues.

Nor had they sent for Orastes, but he came, and he was white as spume blown before the storm. He stood in the gold-domed chamber where the kings held conclave and they beheld in amazement his haggard stare, the fear they had never guessed the mind of Orastes could hold.

"You are weary, Orastes," said Amalric. "Sit upon this divan and I will have a slave fetch you wine. You have ridden hard——"

Orastes waved aside the invitation.

"I have killed three horses on the road from Belverus. I cannot drink wine, I cannot rest, until I have said what I have to say."

He paced back and forth as if some inner fire would not let him stand motionless, and halting before his wondering companions:

"When we employed the Heart of Ahriman to bring a dead man back to life," Orastes said abruptly, "we did not weigh the consequences of tampering in the black dust of the past. The fault is mine, and the sin. We thought only of our ambitions, forgetting what ambitions this man might himself have. And we have loosed a demon upon the earth, a fiend inexplicable to common humanity. I have plumbed deep in evil, but there is a limit to which I, or any man of my race and age, can go. My ancestors were clean men, without any demoniacal taint; it is only I who have sunk into the pits, and I can sin only to the extent of my personal individuality. But behind Xaltotun lie a thousand centuries of black magic and diabolism, an ancient tradition of evil. He is beyond our conception not only because he is a wizard himself, but also because he is the son of a race of wizards.

"I have seen things that have blasted my soul. In the heart of the slumbering hills I have watched Xaltotun commune with the souls of the damned, and invoke the ancient demons of forgotten Acheron. I have seen the accursed descendants of that accursed empire worship him and hail him as their arch-priest. I have seen what he plots—and I tell you it is no less than the restoration of the ancient, black, grisly kingdom of Acheron!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Amalric. "Acheron is dust. There are not enough survivals to make an empire. Not even Xaltotun can reshape the dust of three thousand years."

"You know little of his black powers," answered Orastes grimly. "I have seen the very hills take on an alien and ancient aspect under the spell of his incantations. I have glimpsed, like shadows behind the realities, the dim shapes and outlines of valleys, forests, mountains and lakes that are not as they are today, but as they were in that dim yesterday—have even sensed, rather than glimpsed, the purple towers of forgotten Python shimmering like figures of mist in the dusk.

"And in the last conclave to which I accompanied him, understanding of his sorcery came to me at last, while the drums beat and the beast-like worshippers howled with their heads in the dust. I tell you he would restore Acheron by his magic, by the sorcery of a gigantic blood-sacrifice such as the world has never seen. He would enslave the world, and with a deluge of blood *wash away the present and restore the past!*"

"You are mad!" exclaimed Tarascus.

"Mad?" Orastes turned a haggard stare upon him. "Can any man see what I have seen and remain wholly sane? Yet I speak the truth. He plots the return of Acheron, with its towers and wizards and kings and horrors, as it was in the long ago. The descendants of Acheron will serve him as a nucleus upon which to build, but it is the blood and the bodies of the people of the world today that will furnish the mortar and the stones for the rebuilding. I cannot tell you how. My own brain reels when I try to understand. *But I have seen!* Acheron will be Acheron again, and even the hills, the forests and the rivers will resume their ancient aspect. Why not? If I, with my tiny store of knowledge, could bring to life a man dead three thousand years, why cannot the greatest wizard of the world bring back to life a kingdom dead three thousand years? Out of the dust shall Acheron arise at his bidding."

"How can we thwart him?" asked Tarascus, impressed.

"There is but one way," answered Orastes. "We must steal the Heart of Ahriman!"

"But I——" began Tarascus involuntarily, then closed his mouth quickly.

None had noticed him, and Orastes was continuing.

"It is a power that can be used against him. With it in my hands I might defy him. But how shall we steal it? He has it hidden in some secret place, from which not even a Zamorian thief might filch it. I cannot learn its hiding-place. If he would only sleep again the sleep of the black lotus—but the last time he slept thus was after the battle of the Valkia, when he was weary because of the great magic he had performed, and——"

THE door was locked and bolted, but it swung silently open and Xaltotun stood before them, calm, tranquil, stroking his patriarchal beard; but the lambent lights of hell flickered in his eyes.

"I have taught you too much," he said calmly, pointing a finger like an index of doom at Orastes. And before any could move, he had cast a handful of dust on the floor near the feet of the priest, who

stood like a man turned to marble. It flamed, smoldered; a blue serpentine of smoke rose and swayed upward about Orastes in a slender spiral. And when it had risen above his shoulders it curled about his neck with a whipping suddenness like the stroke of a snake. Orastes' scream was choked to a gurgle. His hands flew to his neck, his eyes were distended, his tongue protruded. The smoke was like a blue rope about his neck; then it faded and was gone, and Orastes slumped to the floor a dead man.

Xaltotun smote his hands together and two men entered, men often observed accompanying him — small, repulsively dark, with red, oblique eyes and pointed, rat-like teeth. They did not speak. Lifting the corpse, they bore it away.

Dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand, Xaltotun seated himself at the ivory table about which sat the pale kings.

"Why are you in conclave?" he demanded.

"The Aquilonians have risen in the west," answered Amalric, recovering from the grisly jolt the death of Orastes had given him. "The fools believe that Conan is alive, and coming at the head of a Poitanian army to reclaim his kingdom. If he had reappeared immediately after Valkia, or if a rumor had been circulated that he lived, the central provinces would not have risen under him, they feared your powers so. But they have become so desperate under Valerius's misrule that they are ready to follow any man who can unite them against us, and prefer sudden death to torture and continual misery.

"Of course the tale has lingered stubbornly in the land that Conan was not really slain at Valkia, but not until recently have the masses accepted it. But Pallantides is back from exile in Ophir, swearing that the king was ill in his tent that day, and that a man-at-arms wore his harness, and a squire who but recently recovered from the stroke of a mace received at Valkia confirms his tale—or pretends to.

"An old woman with a pet wolf has wandered up and down the land, proclaiming that King Conan yet lives, and will return some day to reclaim the crown. And of late the cursed priests of Asura sing the same song. They claim that word has come to them by some mysterious means that Conan is returning to reconquer his domain. I cannot catch either her or them. This is, of course, a trick of Trocero's. My spies tell me there is indisputable evidence that the Poitanians are gathering to invade Aquilonia. I believe that Trocero will bring forward some pretender who he will claim is King Conan."

Tarascus laughed, but there was no conviction in his laughter. He surreptitiously felt of a scar beneath his jupon, and remembered ravens that cawed on the trail of a fugitive; remembered the body of his squire, Arideus, brought back from the border mountains horribly mangled, by a great gray wolf, his terrified soldiers said. But he also remembered a red jewel stolen from a golden chest while a wizard slept, and he said nothing.

And Valerius remembered a dying nobleman who gasped out a tale of fear, and he remembered four Khitans who disappeared into the mazes of the south and never returned. But he held his tongue, for hatred and suspicion of his allies ate at him like a worm, and he desired nothing so much as to see both rebels and Nemedians go down locked in the death grip.

But Amalric exclaimed: "It is absurd to dream that Conan lives!"

For answer Xaltotun cast a roll of parchment on the table.

Amalric caught it up, glared at it. From his lips burst a furious, incoherent cry. He read:

> To Xaltotun, grand fakir of Nemedia: Dog of Acheron, I am returning to my kingdom, and I mean to hang your hide on a bramble.
>
> CONAN.

"A forgery!" exclaimed Amalric.

Xaltotun shook his head.

"It is genuine. I have compared it with the signature on the royal documents on record in the libraries of the court. None could imitate that bold scrawl."

"Then if Conan lives," muttered Amalric, "this uprising will not be like the others, for he is the only man living who can unite the Aquilonians. But," he protested, "this is not like Conan. Why should he put us on our guard with his boasting? One would think that he would strike without warning, after the fashion of the barbarians."

"We are already warned," pointed out Xaltotun. "Our spies have told us of preparations for war in Poitain. He could not cross the mountains without our knowledge; so he sends me his defiance in characteristic manner."

"Why to you?" demanded Valerius. "Why not to me, or to Tarascus?"

Xaltotun turned his inscrutable gaze upon the king.

"Conan is wiser than you," he said at last. "He already knows what you kings have yet to learn—that it is not Tarascus, nor Valerius, no, nor Amalric, but Xaltotun who is the real master of the western nations."

THEY did not reply; they sat staring at him, assailed by a numbing realization of the truth of his assertion.

"There is no road for me but the imperial highway," said Xaltotun. "But first we must crush Conan. I do not know how he escaped me at Belverus, for knowledge of what happened while I lay in the slumber of the black lotus is denied me. But he is in the south, gathering an army. It is his last, desperate blow, made possible only by the desperation of the people who have suffered under Valerius. Let them rise; I hold them all in the palm of my hand. We will wait until he moves against us, and then we will crush him once and for all.

"Then we shall crush Poitain and Gunderland and the stupid Bossonians. After them Ophir, Argos, Zingara, Koth—all the nations of the world we shall weld into one vast empire. You shall rule as my satraps, and as my captains shall be greater than kings are now. I am unconquerable, for the Heart of Ahriman is hidden where no man can ever wield it against me again."

Tarascus averted his gaze, lest Xaltotun read his thoughts. He knew the wizard had not looked into the golden chest with its carven serpents that had seemed to sleep, since he laid the Heart therein. Strange as it seemed, Xaltotun did not know that the Heart had been stolen; the strange jewel was beyond or outside the ring of his dark wisdom; his uncanny talents did not warn him that the chest was empty. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun knew the full extent of Orastes' revelations, for the Pythonian had not mentioned the restoration of Acheron, but only the building of a new, earthly empire. Tarascus did not believe that Xaltotun was yet quite sure of his power; if they needed his aid in their ambitions, no less he needed theirs. Magic depended, to a certain extent after all, on sword strokes and lance thrusts. The king read meaning in Amalric's furtive glance; let the wizard use his arts to help them defeat their most dangerous enemy. Time enough then to turn against him. There might yet be a way to cheat this dark power they had raised.

22. *Drums of Peril*

CONFIRMATION of the war came when the army of Poitain, ten thousand strong, marched through the southern passes with waving banners and shimmer of steel. And at their head, the spies swore, rode a giant figure in black armor, with the royal lion of Aquilonia worked in gold upon the breast of his rich silken surcoat. Conan lived! The king lived! There was no doubt of it in men's minds now, whether friend or foe.

With the news of the invasion from the south there also came word, brought by hard-riding couriers, that a host of Gundermen was moving southward, reinforced by the barons of the northwest and the northern Bossonians. Tarascus marched with thirty-one thousand men to Galparan, on the river Shirki, which the Gundermen must cross to strike at the towns still held by the Nemedians. The Shirki was a swift, turbulent river rushing southwestward through rocky gorges and canyons, and there were few places where an army could cross at that time of the year, when the stream was almost bank-full with the melting of the snows. All the country east of the Shirki was in the hands of the Nemedians, and it was logical to assume that the Gundermen would attempt to cross either at Galparan, or at Tanasul, which lay to the south of Galparan. Reinforcements were daily expected from Nemedia, until word came that the king of Ophir was making hostile demonstrations on Nemedia's southern border, and to spare any more troops would be to expose Nemedia to the risk of an invasion from the south.

Amalric and Valerius moved out from Tarantia with twenty-five thousand men, leaving as large a garrison as they dared to discourage revolts in the cities during their absence. They wished to meet and crush Conan before he could be joined by the rebellious forces of the kingdom.

The king and his Poitanians had crossed the mountains, but there had been no actual clash of arms, no attack on towns or fortresses. Conan had appeared and disappeared. Apparently he had turned westward through the wild, thinly settled hill country, and entered the Bossonian marches, gathering recruits as he went. Amalric and Valerius with their host, Nemedians, Aquilonian renegades, and ferocious mercenaries, moved through the land in baffled wrath, looking for a foe which did not appear.

Amalric found it impossible to obtain more than vague general tidings about Conan's movements. Scouting-parties had a way of riding out and never returning, and it was not uncommon to find a spy crucified to an oak. The countryside was up and striking as peasants and countryfolk strike—savagely, murderously and secretly. All that Amalric knew certainly was that a large force of Gundermen and northern Bossonians was somewhere to the north of him, beyond the Shirki, and that Conan with a smaller force of Poitanians and southern Bossonians was somewhere to the southwest of him.

He began to grow fearful that if he and Valerius advanced farther into the wild country, Conan might elude them entirely, march around them and invade the central provinces behind them. Amalric fell back from the Shirki valley and camped in a plain a day's ride from Tanasul. There he waited. Tarascus maintained his position at Galparan, for he feared that Conan's maneuvers were intended to draw him southward, and so let the Gundermen into the kingdom at the northern crossing.

TO AMALRIC'S camp came Xaltotun in his chariot drawn by the uncanny horses that never tired, and he entered Amalric's tent where the baron conferred

with Valerius over a map spread on an ivory camp table.

This map Xaltotun crumpled and flung aside.

"What your scouts cannot learn for you," quoth he, "my spies tell me, though their information is strangely blurred and imperfect, as if unseen forces were working against me.

"Conan is advancing along the Shirki river with ten thousand Poitanians, three thousand southern Bossonians, and barons of the west and south with their retainers to the number of five thousand. An army of thirty thousand Gundermen and northern Bossonians is pushing southward to join him. They have established contact by means of secret communications used by the cursed priests of Asura, who seem to be opposing me, and whom I will feed to a serpent when the battle is over—I swear it by Set!

"Both armies are headed for the crossing at Tanasul, but I do not believe that the Gundermen will cross the river. I believe that Conan will cross, instead, and join them."

"Why should Conan cross the river?" demanded Amalric.

"Because it is to his advantage to delay the battle. The longer he waits, the stronger he will become, the more precarious our position. The hills on the other side of the river swarm with people passionately loyal to his cause—broken men, refugees, fugitives from Valerius's cruelty. From all over the kingdom men are hurrying to join his army, singly and by companies. Daily, parties from our armies are ambushed and cut to pieces by the country-folk. Revolt grows in the central provinces, and will soon burst into open rebellion. The garrisons we left there are not sufficient, and we can hope for no reinforcements from Nemedia for the time being. I see the hand of Pallantides in this brawling on the Ophirean frontier. He has kin in Ophir.

"If we do not catch and crush Conan quickly the provinces will be in a blaze of revolt behind us. We shall have to fall back to Tarantia to defend what we have taken; and we may have to fight our way through a country in rebellion, with Conan's whole force at our heels, and then stand siege in the city itself, with enemies within as well as without. No, we cannot wait. We must crush Conan before his army grows too great, before the central provinces rise. With his head hanging above the gate at Tarantia you will see how quickly the rebellion will fall apart."

"Why do you not put a spell on his army to slay them all?" asked Valerius, half in mockery.

Xaltotun stared at the Aquilonian as if he read the full extent of the mocking madness that lurked in those wayward eyes.

"Do not worry," he said at last. "My arts shall crush Conan finally like a lizard under the heel. But even sorcery is aided by pikes and swords."

"If he crosses the river and takes up his position in the Goralian hills he may be hard to dislodge," said Amalric. "But if we catch him in the valley on this side of the river we can wipe him out. How far is Conan from Tanasul?"

"At the rate he is marching he should reach the crossing sometime tomorrow night. His men are rugged and he is pushing them hard. He should arrive there at least a day before the Gundermen."

"Good!" Amalric smote the table with his clenched fist. "I can reach Tanasul before he can. I'll send a rider to Tarascus, bidding him follow me to Tanasul. By the time he arrives I will have cut Conan off from the crossing and destroyed

him. Then our combined force can cross the river and deal with the Gundermen."

Xaltotun shook his head impatiently.

"A good enough plan if you were dealing with anyone but Conan. But your twenty-five thousand men are not enough to destroy his eighteen thousand before the Gundermen come up. They will fight with the desperation of wounded panthers. And suppose the Gundermen come up while the hosts are locked in battle? You will be caught between two fires and destroyed before Tarascus can arrive. He will reach Tanasul too late to aid you."

"What, then?" demanded Amalric.

"Move with your whole strength against Conan," answered the man from Acheron. "Send a rider bidding Tarascus join us here. We will await his coming. Then we will march together to Tanasul."

"But while we wait," protested Amalric, "Conan will cross the river and join the Gundermen."

"Conan will not cross the river," answered Xaltotun.

Amalric's head jerked up and he stared into the cryptic dark eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there were torrential rains far to the north, at the head of the Shirki? Suppose the river came down in such flood as to render the crossing at Tanasul impassable? Could we not then bring up our entire force at our leisure, catch Conan on this side of the river and crush him, and then, when the flood subsided, which I think it would do the next day, could we not cross the river and destroy the Gundermen? Thus we could use our full strength against each of these smaller forces in turn."

VALERIUS laughed as he always laughed at the prospect of the ruin of either friend or foe, and drew a restless hand jerkily through his unruly yellow locks. Amalric stared at the man from Acheron with mingled fear and admiration.

"If we caught Conan in Shirki valley with the hill ridges to his right and the river in flood to his left," he admitted, "with our whole force we could annihilate him. Do you think—are you sure—do you believe such rains will fall?"

"I go to my tent," answered Xaltotun, rising. "Necromancy is not accomplished by the waving of a wand. Send a rider to Tarascus. And let none approach my tent."

That last command was unnecessary. No man in that host could have been bribed to approach that mysterious black silken pavilion, the door-flaps of which were always closely drawn. None but Xaltotun ever entered it, yet voices were often heard issuing from it; its walls billowed sometimes without a wind, and weird music came from it. Sometimes, deep in midnight, its silken walls were lit red by flames flickering within, limning misshapen silhouettes that passed to and fro.

Lying in his own tent that night, Amalric heard the steady rumble of a drum in Xaltotun's tent; through the darkness it boomed steadily, and occasionally the Nemedian could have sworn that a deep, croaking voice mingled with the pulse of the drum. And he shuddered, for he knew that voice was not the voice of Xaltotun. The drum rustled and muttered on like deep thunder, heard afar off, and before dawn Amalric, glancing from his tent, caught the red flicker of lightning afar on the northern horizon. In all other parts of the sky the great stars blazed whitely. But the distant lightning flickered incessantly, like the crimson glint of firelight on a tiny, turning blade.

At sunset of the next day Tarascus came up with his host, dusty and weary from hard marching, the footmen strag-

gling hours behind the horsemen. They camped in the plain near Amalric's camp, and at dawn the combined army moved westward.

Ahead of him roved a swarm of scouts, and Amalric waited impatiently for them to return and tell of the Poitanians trapped beside a furious flood. But when the scouts met the column it was with the news that Conan had crossed the river!

"What?" exclaimed Amalric. "Did he cross before the flood?"

"There was no flood," answered the scouts, puzzled. "Late last night he came up to Tanasul and flung his army across."

"No flood?" exclaimed Xaltotun, taken aback for the first time in Amalric's knowledge. "Impossible! There were mighty rains upon the headwaters of the Shirki last night and the night before that!"

"That may be, your lordship," answered the scout. "It is true the water was muddy, and the people of Tanasul said that the river rose perhaps a foot yesterday; but that was not enough to prevent Conan's crossing."

Xaltotun's sorcery had failed! The thought hammered in Amalric's brain. His horror of this strange man out of the past had grown steadily since that night in Belverus when he had seen a brown, shriveled mummy swell and grow into a living man. And the death of Orastes had changed lurking horror into active fear. In his heart was a grisly conviction that the man—or devil—was invincible. Yet now he had undeniable proof of his failure.

Yet even the greatest of necromancers might fail occasionally, thought the baron. At any rate, he dared not oppose the man from Acheron—yet. Orastes was dead, writhing in Mitra only knew what nameless hell, and Amalric knew his sword would scarcely prevail where the black wisdom of the renegade priest had failed. What grisly abomination Xaltotun plotted lay in the unpredictable future. Conan and his host were a present menace against which Xaltotun's wizardry might well be needed before the play was all played.

They came to Tanasul, a small fortified village at the spot where a reef of rocks made a natural bridge across the river, passable always except in times of greatest flood. Scouts brought in the news that Conan had taken up his position in the Goralian hills, which began to rise a few miles beyond the river. And just before sundown the Gundermen had arrived in his camp.

Amalric looked at Xaltotun, inscrutable and alien in the light of the flaring torches. Night had fallen.

"What now? Your magic has failed. Conan confronts us with an army nearly as strong as our own, and he has the advantage of position. We have a choice of two evils: to camp here and await his attack, or to fall back toward Tarantia and await reinforcements."

"We are ruined if we wait," answered Xaltotun. "Cross the river and camp on the plain. We will attack at dawn."

"But his position is too strong!" exclaimed Amalric.

"Fool!" A gust of passion broke the veneer of the wizard's calm. "Have you forgotten Valkia? Because some obscure elemental principle prevented the flood do you deem me helpless? I had intended that your spears should exterminate our enemies; but do not fear: it is my arts shall crush their host. Conan is in a trap. He will never see another sun set. Cross the river!"

They crossed by the flare of torches. The hoofs of the horses clinked on the rocky bridge, splashed through the shallows. The glint of the torches on shields and breast-plates was reflected redly in

the black water. The rock bridge was broad on which they crossed, but even so it was past midnight before the host was camped in the plain beyond. Above them they could see fires winking redly in the distance. Conan had turned at bay in the Goralian hills, which had more than once before served as the last stand of an Aquilonian king.

Amalric left his pavilion and strode restlessly through the camp. A weird glow flickered in Xaltotun's tent, and from time to time a demoniacal cry slashed the silence, and there was a low sinister muttering of a drum that rustled rather than rumbled.

Amalric, his instincts whetted by the night and the circumstances, felt that Xaltotun was opposed by more than physical force. Doubts of the wizard's power assailed him. He glanced at the fires high above him, and his face set in grim lines. He and his army were deep in the midst of a hostile country. Up there among those hills lurked thousands of wolfish figures out of whose hearts and souls all emotion and hope had been scourged except a frenzied hate for their conquerors, a mad lust for vengeance. Defeat meant annihilation, retreat through a land swarming with blood-mad enemies. And on the morrow he must hurl his host against the grimmest fighter in the western nations, and his desperate horde. If Xaltotun failed them now——

HALF a dozen men-at-arms strode out of the shadows. The firelight glinted on their breast-plates and helmet crests. Among them they half led, half dragged a gaunt figure in tattered rags.

Saluting, they spoke: "My lord, this man came to the outposts and said he desired word with King Valerius. He is an Aquilonian."

He looked more like a wolf—a wolf the traps had scarred. Old sores that only fetters make showed on his wrists and ankles. A great brand, the mark of hot iron, disfigured his face. His eyes glared through the tangle of his matted hair as he half crouched before the baron.

"Who are you, you filthy dog?" demanded the Nemedian.

"Call me Tiberias," answered the man, and his teeth clicked in an involuntary spasm. "I have come to tell you how to trap Conan."

"A traitor, eh?" rumbled the baron.

"Men say you have gold," mouthed the man, shivering under his rags. "Give some to me! Give me gold and I will show you how to defeat the king!" His eyes glazed widely, his outstretched, upturned hands were spread like quivering claws.

Amalric shrugged his shoulders in distaste. But no tool was too base for his use.

"If you speak the truth you shall have more gold than you can carry," he said. "If you are a liar and a spy I will have you crucified head-down. Bring him along."

In the tent of Valerius, the baron pointed to the man who crouched shivering before them, huddling his rags about him.

"He says he knows a way to aid us on the morrow. We will need aid, if Xaltotun's plan is no better than it has proved so far. Speak on, dog."

The man's body writhed in his strange convulsions. Words came in a stumbling rush:

"Conan camps at the head of the Valley of Lions. It is shaped like a fan, with steep hills on either side. If you attack him tomorrow you will have to march straight up the valley. You cannot climb the hills on either side. But if King Valerius will deign to accept my service, I will guide him through the hills and show him how he can come upon King

Conan from behind. But if it is to be done at all, we must start soon. It is many hours' riding, for one must go miles to the west, then miles to the north, then turn eastward and so come into the Valley of Lions from behind, as the Gundermen came."

Amalric hesitated, tugging his chin. In these chaotic times it was not rare to find men willing to sell their souls for a few gold pieces.

"If you lead me astray you will die," said Valerius. "You are aware of that, are you not?"

The man shivered, but his wide eyes did not waver.

"If I betray you, slay me!"

"Conan will not dare divide his force," mused Amalric. "He will need all his men to repel our attack. He cannot spare any to lay ambushes in the hills. Besides, this fellow knows his hide depends on his leading you as he promised. Would a dog like him sacrifice himself? Nonsense! No, Valerius, I believe the man is honest."

"Or a greater thief than most, for he would sell his liberator," laughed Valerius. "Very well. I will follow the dog. How many men can you spare me?"

"Five thousand should be enough," answered Amalric. "A surprize attack on their rear will throw them into confusion, and that will be enough. I shall expect your attack about noon."

"You will know when I strike," answered Valerius.

As Amalric returned to his pavilion he noted with gratification that Xaltotun was still in his tent, to judge from the blood-freezing cries that shuddered forth into the night air from time to time. When presently he heard the clink of steel and the jingle of bridles in the outer darkness, he smiled grimly. Valerius had about served his purpose. The baron knew that Conan was like a wounded lion that rends and tears even in his death-throes. When Valerius struck from the rear, the desperate strokes of the Cimmerian might well wipe his rival out of existence before he himself succumbed. So much the better. Amalric felt he could well dispense with Valerius, once he had paved the way for a Nemedian victory.

The five thousand horsemen who accompanied Valerius were hard-bitten Aquilonian renegades for the most part. In the still starlight they moved out of the sleeping camp, following the westward trend of the great black masses that rose against the stars ahead of them. Valerius rode at their head, and beside him rode Tiberias, a leather thong about his wrist gripped by a man-at-arms who rode on the other side of him. Others kept close behind with drawn swords.

"Play us false and you die instantly," Valerius pointed out. "I do not know every sheep-path in these hills, but I know enough about the general configuration of the country to know the directions we must take to come in behind the Valley of Lions. See that you do not lead us astray."

The man ducked his head and his teeth chattered as he volubly assured his captor of his loyalty, staring up stupidly at the banner that floated over him, the golden serpent of the old dynasty.

Skirting the extremities of the hills that locked the Valley of Lions, they swung wide to the west. An hour's ride and they turned north, forging through wild and rugged hills, following dim trails and tortuous paths. Sunrise found them some miles northwest of Conan's position, and here the guide turned eastward and led them through a maze of labyrinths and crags. Valerius nodded, judging their position by various peaks thrusting up above the others. He had kept his bearings in a general way, and he knew they

were still headed in the right direction.

But now, without warning, a gray fleecy mass came billowing down from the north, veiling the slopes, spreading out through the valleys. It blotted out the sun; the world became a blind gray void in which visibility was limited to a matter of yards. Advance became a stumbling, groping muddle. Valerius cursed. He could no longer see the peaks that had served him as guide-posts. He must depend wholly upon the traitorous guide. The golden serpent drooped in the windless air.

Presently Tiberias seemed himself confused; he halted, stared about uncertainly.

"Are you lost, dog?" demanded Valerius harshly.

"Listen!"

Somewhere ahead of them a faint vibration began, the rhythmic rumble of a drum.

"Conan's drum!" exclaimed the Aquilonian.

"If we are close enough to hear the drum," said Valerius, "why do we not hear the shouts and the clang of arms? Surely battle has joined."

"The gorges and the winds play strange tricks," answered Tiberias, his teeth chattering with the ague that is frequently the lot of men who have spent much time in damp underground dungeons. Listen!"

Faintly to their ears came a low muffled roar.

"They are fighting down in the valley!" cried Tiberias. "The drum is beating on the heights. Let us hasten!"

He rode straight on toward the sound of the distant drum as one who knows his ground at last. Valerius followed, cursing the fog. Then it occurred to him that it would mask his advance. Conan could not see him coming. He would be at the Cimmerian's back before the noonday sun dispelled the mists.

Just now he could not tell what lay on either hand, whether cliffs, thickets or gorges. The drum throbbed unceasingly, growing louder as they advanced, but they heard no more of the battle. Valerius had no idea toward what point of the compass they were headed. He started as he saw gray rock walls looming through the smoky drifts on either hand, and realized that they were riding through a narrow defile. But the guide showed no sign of nervousness, and Valerius hove a sigh of relief when the walls widened out and became invisible in the fog. They were through the defile; if an ambush had been planned, it would have been made in that pass.

But now Tiberias halted again. The drum was rumbling louder, and Valerius could not determine from what direction the sound was coming. Now it seemed ahead of him, now behind, now on one hand or the other. Valerius glared about him impatiently, sitting on his war-horse with wisps of mist curling about him and the moisture gleaming on his armor. Behind him the long lines of steel-clad riders faded away and away like phantoms into the mist.

"Why do you tarry, dog?" he demanded.

The man seemed to be listening to the ghostly drum. Slowly he straightened in his saddle, turned his head and faced Valerius, and the smile on his lips was terrible to see.

"The fog is thinning, Valerius," he said in a new voice, pointing a bony finger. "Look!"

THE drum was silent. The fog was fading away. First the crests of cliffs came in sight above the gray clouds, tall and spectral. Lower and lower crawled the mists, shrinking, fading. Valerius started up in his stirrups with a cry that the horsemen echoed behind him.

On all sides of them the cliffs towered. They were not in a wide, open valley as he had supposed. They were in a blind gorge walled by sheer cliffs hundreds of feet high. The only entrance or exit was that narrow defile through which they had ridden.

"Dog!" Valerius struck Tiberias full in the mouth with his clenched mailed hand. "What devil's trick is this?"

Tiberias spat out a mouthful of blood and shook with fearful laughter.

"A trick that shall rid the world of a beast! Look, dog!"

Again Valerius cried out, more in fury than in fear.

The defile was blocked by a wild and terrible band of men who stood silent as images—ragged, shock-headed men with spears in their hands—hundreds of them. And up on the cliffs appeared other faces—thousands of faces—wild, gaunt, ferocious faces, marked by fire and steel and starvation.

"A trick of Conan's!" raged Valerius.

"Conan knows nothing of it," laughed Tiberias. "It was the plot of broken men, of men you ruined and turned to beasts. Amalric was right. Conan has not divided his army. We are the rabble who followed him, the wolves who skulked in these hills, the homeless men, the hopeless men. This was our plan, and the priests of Asura aided us with the mist. Look at them, Valerius! Each bears the mark of your hand, on his body or on his heart!

"Look at me! You do not know me, do you, what of this scar your hangman burned upon me? Once you knew me. Once I was lord of Amilius, the man whose sons you murdered, whose daughter your mercenaries ravished and slew. You said I would not sacrifice myself to trap you? Almighty gods, if I had a thousand lives I would give them all to buy your doom!

"And I have bought it! Look on the men you broke, dead men who once played the king! Their hour has come! This gorge is your tomb. Try to climb the cliffs: they are steep, they are high. Try to fight your way back through the defile: spears will block your path, boulders will crush you from above! Dog! I will be waiting for you in hell!"

Throwing back his head he laughed until the rocks rang. Valerius leaned from his saddle and slashed down with his great sword, severing shoulder-bone and breast. Tiberias sank to the earth, still laughing ghastlily through a gurgle of gushing blood.

The drums had begun again, encircling the gorge with guttural thunder; boulders came crashing down; above the screams of dying men shrilled the arrows in blinding clouds from the cliffs.

23. The Road to Acheron

DAWN was just whitening the east when Amalric drew up his hosts in the mouth of the Valley of Lions. This valley was flanked by low, rolling but steep hills, and the floor pitched upward in a series of irregular natural terraces. On the uppermost of these terraces Conan's army held its position, awaiting the attack. The host that had joined him, marching down from Gunderman, had not been composed exclusively of spearmen. With them had come seven thousand Bossonian archers, and four thousand barons and their retainers of the north and west, swelling the ranks of his cavalry.

The pikemen were drawn up in a compact wedge-shaped formation at the narrow head of the valley. There were nineteen thousand of them, mostly Gundermen, though some four thousand were Aquilonians of the other provinces. They were flanked on either hand by five thou-

and Bossonian archers. Behind the ranks of the pikemen the knights sat their steeds motionless, lances raised: ten thousand knights of Poitain, nine thousand Aquilonians, barons and their retainers.

It was a strong position. His flanks could not be turned, for that would mean climbing the steep, wooded hills in the teeth of the arrows and swords of the Bossonians. His camp lay directly behind him, in a narrow, steep-walled valley which was indeed merely a continuation of the Valley of Lions, pitching up at a higher level. He did not fear a surprize from the rear, because the hills behind him were full of refugees and broken men whose loyalty to him was beyond question.

But if his position was hard to shake, it was equally hard to escape from. It was a trap as well as a fortress for the defenders, a desperate last stand of men who did not expect to survive unless they were victorious. The only line of retreat possible was through the narrow valley at their rear.

XALTOTUN mounted a hill on the left side of the valley, near the wide mouth. This hill rose higher than the others, and was known as the King's Altar, for a reason long forgotten. Only Xaltotun knew, and his memory dated back three thousand years.

He was not alone. His two familiars, silent, hairy, furtive and dark, were with him, and they bore a young Aquilonian girl, bound hand and foot. They laid her on an ancient stone, which was curiously like an altar, and which crowned the summit of the hill. For long centuries it had stood there, worn by the elements until many doubted that it was anything but a curiously shapen natural rock. But what it was, and why it stood there, Xaltotun remembered from of old. The familiars went away, with their bent backs like silent gnomes, and Xaltotun stood alone beside the stone altar, his dark beard blown in the wind, overlooking the valley.

He could see clear back to the winding Shirki, and up into the hills beyond the head of the valley. He could see the gleaming wedge of steel drawn up at the head of the terraces, the burganets of the archers glinting among the rocks and bushes, the silent knights motionless on their steeds, their pennons flowing above their helmets, their lances rising in a bristling thicket.

Looking in the other direction he could see the long serried lines of the Nemedians moving in ranks of shining steel into the mouth of the valley. Behind them the gay pavilions of the lords and knights and the drab tents of the common soldiers stretched back almost to the river.

Like a river of molten steel the Nemedian host flowed into the valley, the great scarlet dragon rippling over it. First marched the bowmen, in even ranks, arbalests half raised, bolts nocked, fingers on triggers. After them came the pikemen, and behind them the real strength of the army—the mounted knights, their banners unfurled to the wind, their lances lifted, walking their great steeds forward as if they rode to a banquet.

And higher up on the slopes the smaller Aquilonian host stood grimly silent.

There were thirty thousand Nemedian knights, and, as in most Hyborian nations, it was the chivalry which was the sword of the army. The footmen were used only to clear the way for a charge of the armored knights. There were twenty-one thousand of these, pikemen and archers.

The bowmen began loosing as they advanced, without breaking ranks, launching their quarrels with a whir and tang.

But the bolts fell short or rattled harmlessly from the overlapping shields of the Gundermen. And before the arbalesters could come within killing range, the arching shafts of the Bossonians were wreaking havoc in their ranks.

A little of this, a futile attempt at exchanging fire, and the Nemedian bowmen began falling back in disorder. Their armor was light, their weapons no match for the Bossonian longbows. The western archers were sheltered by bushes and rocks. Moreover, the Nemedian footmen lacked something of the morale of the horsemen, knowing as they did that they were being used merely to clear the way for the knights.

The crossbowmen fell back, and between their opening lines the pikemen advanced. These were largely mercenaries, and their masters had no compunction about sacrificing them. They were intended to mask the advance of the knights until the latter were within smiting distance. So while the arbalesters plied their bolts from either flank at long range, the pikemen marched into the teeth of the blast from above, and behind them the knights came on.

When the pikemen began to falter beneath the savage hail of death that whistled down the slopes among them, a trumpet blew, their companies divided to right and left, and through them the mailed knights thundered.

They ran full into a cloud of stinging death. The clothyard shafts found every crevice in their armor and the housings of the steeds. Horses scrambling up the grassy terraces reared and plunged backward, bearing their riders with them. Steel-clad forms littered the slopes. The charge wavered and ebbed back.

Back down in the valley Amalric reformed his ranks. Tarascus was fighting with drawn sword under the scarlet dragon, but it was the baron of Tor who commanded that day. Amalric swore as he glanced at the forest of lance-tips visible above and beyond the head-pieces of the Gundermen. He had hoped his retirement would draw the knights out in a charge down the slopes after him, to be raked from either flank by his bowmen and swamped by the numbers of his horsemen. But they had not moved. Camp-servants brought skins of water from the river. Knights doffed their helmets and drenched their sweating heads. The wounded on the slopes screamed vainly for water. In the upper valley, springs supplied the defenders. They did not thirst that long, hot spring day.

On the King's Altar, beside the ancient, carven stone, Xaltotun watched the steel tide ebb and flow. On came the knights, with waving plumes and dipping lances. Through a whistling cloud of arrows they plowed to break like a thundering wave on the bristling wall of spears and shields. Axes rose and fell above the plumed helmets, spears thrust upward, bringing down horses and riders. The pride of the Gundermen was no less fierce than that of the knights. They were not spear-fodder, to be sacrificed for the glory of better men. They were the finest infantry in the world, with a tradition that made their morale unshakable. The kings of Aquilonia had long learned the worth of unbreakable infantry. They held their formation unshaken; over their gleaming ranks flowed the great lion banner, and at the tip of the wedge a giant figure in black armor roared and smote like a hurricane, with a dripping ax that split steel and bone alike.

The Nemedians fought as gallantly as their traditions of high courage demanded. But they could not break the iron wedge, and from the wooded knolls on either hand arrows raked their close-packed ranks mercilessly. Their own

bowmen were useless, their pikemen unable to climb the heights and come to grips with the Bossonians. Slowly, stubbornly, sullenly, the grim knights fell back, counting their empty saddles. Above them the Gundermen made no outcry of triumph. They closed their ranks, locking up the gaps made by the fallen. Sweat ran into their eyes from under their steel caps. They gripped their spears and waited, their fierce hearts swelling with pride that a king should fight on foot with them. Behind them the Aquilonian knights had not moved. They sat their steeds, grimly immobile.

A knight spurred a sweating horse up the hill called the King's Altar, and glared at Xaltotun with bitter eyes.

"Amalric bids me say that it is time to use your magic, wizard," he said. "We are dying like flies down there in the valley. We cannot break their ranks."

Xaltotun seemed to expand, to grow tall and awesome and terrible.

"Return to Amalric," he said. "Tell him to reform his ranks for a charge, but to await my signal. Before that signal is given he will see a sight that he will remember until he lies dying!"

The knight saluted as if compelled against his will, and thundered down the hill at breakneck pace.

Xaltotun stood beside the dark altarstone and stared across the valley, at the dead and wounded men on the terraces, at the grim, blood-stained band at the head of the slopes, at the dusty, steel-clad ranks reforming in the vale below. He glanced up at the sky, and he glanced down at the slim white figure on the dark stone. And lifting a dagger inlaid with archaic hieroglyphs, he intoned an immemorial invocation:

"Set, god of darkness, scaly lord of the shadows, by the blood of a virgin and the sevenfold symbol I call to your sons below the black earth! Children of the deeps, below the red earth, under the black earth, awaken and shake your awful manes! Let the hills rock and the stones topple upon my enemies! Let the sky grow dark above them, the earth unstable beneath their feet! Let a wind from the deep black earth curl up beneath their feet, and blacken and shrivel them——"

He halted short, dagger lifted. In the tense silence the roar of the hosts rose beneath him, borne on the wind.

On the other side of the altar stood a man in a black hooded robe, whose coif shadowed pale delicate features and dark eyes calm and meditative.

"Dog of Asura!" whispered Xaltotun, and his voice was like the hiss of an angered serpent. "Are you mad, that you seek your doom? Ho, Baal! Chiron!"

"Call again, dog of Acheron!" said the other, and laughed. "Summon them loudly. They will not hear, unless your shouts reverberate in hell."

From a thicket on the edge of the crest came a somber old woman in peasant garb, her hair flowing over her shoulders, a great gray wolf following at her heels.

"Witch, priest and wolf," muttered Xaltotun grimly, and laughed. "Fools, to pit your charlatan's mummery against my arts! With a wave of my hand I brush you from my path!"

"Your arts are straws in the wind, dog of Python," answered the Asurian. "Have you wondered why the Shirki did not come down in flood and trap Conan on the other bank? When I saw the lightning in the night I guessed your plan, and my spells dispersed the clouds you had summoned before they could empty their torrents. You did not even know that your rain-making wizardry had failed."

"You lie!" cried Xaltotun, but the confidence in his voice was shaken. "I have felt the impact of a powerful sorcery against mine—but no man on earth could undo the rain-magic, once made, unless he possessed the very heart of sorcery."

"But the flood you plotted did not come to pass," answered the priest. "Look at your allies in the valley, Pythonian! You have led them to the slaughter! They are caught in the fangs of the trap, and you cannot aid them. Look!"

He pointed. Out of the narrow gorge of the upper valley, behind the Poitanians, a horseman came flying, whirling something about his head that flashed in the sun. Recklessly he hurtled down the slopes, through the ranks of the Gundermen, who sent up a deep-throated roar and clashed their spears and shields like thunder in the hills. On the terraces between the hosts the sweat-soaked horse reared and plunged, and his wild rider yelled and brandished the thing in his hands like one demented. It was the torn remnant of a scarlet banner, and the sun struck dazzlingly on the golden scales of a serpent that writhed thereon.

"Valerius is dead!" cried Hadrathus ringingly. "A fog and a drum lured him to his doom! I gathered that fog, dog of Python, and I dispersed it! I, with my magic which is greater than your magic!"

"What matters it?" roared Xaltotun, a terrible sight, his eyes blazing, his features convulsed. "Valerius was a fool. I do not need him. I can crush Conan without human aid!"

"Why have you delayed?" mocked Hadrathus. "Why have you allowed so many of your allies to fall pierced by arrows and spitted on spears?"

"Because blood aids great sorcery!" thundered Xaltotun, in a voice that made the rocks quiver. A lurid nimbus played about his awful head. "Because no wizard wastes his strength thoughtlessly. Because I would conserve my powers for the great days to be, rather than employ them in a hill-country brawl. But now, by Set, I shall loose them to the uttermost! Watch, dog of Asura, false priest of an outworn god, and see a sight that shall blast your reason for evermore!"

Hadrathus threw back his head and laughed, and hell was in his laughter.

"Look, black devil of Python!"

His hand came from under his robe holding something that flamed and burned in the sun, changing the light to a pulsing golden glow in which the flesh of Xaltotun looked like the flesh of a corpse.

Xaltotun cried out as if he had been stabbed.

"The Heart! The Heart of Ahriman!"

"Aye! The one power that is greater than your power!"

Xaltotun seemed to shrivel, to grow old. Suddenly his beard was shot with snow, his locks flecked with gray.

"The Heart!" he mumbled. "You stole it! Dog! Thief!"

"Not I! It has been on a long journey far to the southward. But now it is in my hands, and your black arts cannot stand against it. As it resurrected you, so shall it hurl you back into the night whence it drew you. You shall go down the dark road to Acheron, which is the road of silence and the night. The dark empire, unreborn, shall remain a legend and a black memory. Conan shall reign again. And the Heart of Ahriman shall go back into the cavern below the temple of Mitra, to burn as a symbol of the power of Aquilonia for a thousand years!"

Xaltotun screamed inhumanly and rushed around the altar, dagger lifted; but from somewhere—out of the sky, perhaps, or the great jewel that blazed in the hand of Hadrathus—shot a jetting beam of blinding blue light. Full against

the breast of Xaltotun it flashed, and the hills re-echoed the concussion. The wizard of Acheron went down as though struck by a thunderbolt, and before he touched the ground he was fearfully altered. Beside the altar-stone lay no fresh-slain corpse, but a shriveled mummy, a brown, dry, unrecognizable carcass sprawling among moldering swathings.

Somberly old Zelata looked down.

"He was not a living man," she said. "The Heart lent him a false aspect of life, that deceived even himself. I never saw him as other than a mummy."

Hadrathus bent to unbind the swooning girl on the altar, when from among the trees appeared a strange apparition—Xaltotun's chariot drawn by the weird horses. Silently they advanced to the altar and halted, with the chariot wheel almost touching the brown withered thing on the grass. Hadrathus lifted the body of the wizard and placed it in the chariot. And without hesitation the uncanny steeds turned and moved off southward, down the hill. And Hadrathus and Zelata and the gray wolf watched them go—down the long road to Acheron which is beyond the ken of men.

Down in the valley Amalric had stiffened in his saddle when he saw that wild horseman curvetting and caracoling on the slopes while he brandished that blood-stained serpent-banner. Then some instinct jerked his head about, toward the hill known as the King's Altar. And his lips parted. Every man in the valley saw it—an arching shaft of dazzling light that towered up from the summit of the hill, showering golden fire. High above the hosts it burst in a blinding blaze that momentarily paled the sun.

"That's not Xaltotun's signal!" roared the baron.

"No!" shouted Tarascus. "It's a signal to the Aquilonians! Look!"

Above them the immobile ranks were moving at last, and a deep-throated roar thundered across the vale.

"Xaltotun has failed us!" bellowed Amalric furiously. "Valerius has failed us! We have been led into a trap! Mitra's curse on Xaltotun who led us here! Sound the retreat!"

"Too late!" yelled Tarascus. *"Look!"*

Up on the slopes the forest of lances dipped, leveled. The ranks of the Gundermen rolled back to right and left like a parting curtain. And with a thunder like the rising roar of a hurricane, the knights of Aquilonia crashed down the slopes.

The impetus of that charge was irresistible. Bolts driven by the demoralized arbalesters glanced from their shields, their bent helmets. Their plumes and pennons streaming out behind them, their lances lowered, they swept over the wavering lines of pikemen and roared down the slopes like a wave.

Amalric yelled an order to charge, and the Nemedians with desperate courage spurred their horses at the slopes. They still outnumbered the attackers.

But they were weary men on tired horses, charging uphill. The onrushing knights had not struck a blow that day. Their horses were fresh. They were coming downhill and they came like a thunderbolt. And like a thunderbolt they smote the struggling ranks of the Nemedians—smote them, splite them apart, ripped them asunder and dashed the remnants headlong down the slopes.

After them on foot came the Gundermen, blood-mad, and the Bossonians were swarming down the hills, loosing as they ran at every foe that still moved.

Down the slopes washed the tide of battle, the dazed Nemedians swept on the crest of the wave. Their archers had thrown down their arbalests and were fleeing. Such pikemen as had survived

the blasting charge of the knights were cut to pieces by the ruthless Gundermen.

In a wild confusion the battle swept through the wide mouth of the valley and into the plain beyond. All over the plain swarmed the warriors, fleeing and pursuing, broken into single combat and clumps of smiting, hacking knights on rearing, wheeling horses. But the Nemedians were smashed, broken, unable to re-form or make a stand. By the hundreds they broke away, spurring for the river. Many reached it, rushed across and rode eastward. The countryside was up behind them; the people hunted them like wolves. Few ever reached Tarantia.

The final break did not come until the fall of Amalric. The baron, striving in vain to rally his men, rode straight at the clump of knights that followed the giant in black armor whose surcoat bore the royal lion, and over whose head floated the golden lion banner with the scarlet leopard of Poitain beside it. A tall warrior in gleaming armor couched his lance and charged to meet the lord of Tor. They met like a thunderclap. The Nemedian's lance, striking his foe's helmet, snapped bolts and rivets and tore off the casque, revealing the features of Pallantides. But the Aquilonian's lance-head crashed through shield and breast-plate to transfix the baron's heart.

A roar went up as Amalric was hurled from his saddle, snapping the lance that impaled him, and the Nemedians gave way as a barrier bursts under the surging impact of a tidal wave. They rode for the river in a blind stampede that swept the plain like a whirlwind. The hour of the Dragon had passed.

TARASCUS did not flee. Amalric was dead, the color-bearer slain, and the royal Nemedian banner trampled in the blood and dust. Most of his knights were fleeing and the Aquilonians were riding them down; Tarascus knew the day was lost, but with a handful of faithful followers he raged through the mêlée, conscious of but one desire—to meet Conan, the Cimmerian. And at last he met him.

Formations had been destroyed utterly, close-knit bands broken asunder and swept apart. The crest of Trocero gleamed in one part of the plain, those of Prospero and Pallantides in others. Conan was alone. The house-troops of Tarascus had fallen one by one. The two kings met man to man.

Even as they rode at each other, the horse of Tarascus sobbed and sank under him. Conan leaped from his own steed and ran at him, as the king of Nemedia disengaged himself and rose. Steel flashed blindingly in the sun, clashed loudly, and blue sparks flew; then a clang of armor as Tarascus measured his full length on the earth beneath a thunderous stroke of Conan's broadsword.

The Cimmerian placed a mail-shod foot on his enemy's breast, and lifted his sword. His helmet was gone; he shook back his black mane and his blue eyes blazed with their old fire.

"Do you yield?"

"Will you give me quarter?" demanded the Nemedian.

"Aye. Better than you'd have given me, you dog. Life for you and all your men who throw down their arms. Though I ought to split your head for an infernal thief," the Cimmerian added.

Tarascus twisted his neck and glared over the plain. The remnants of the Nemedian host were flying across the stone bridge with swarms of victorious Aquilonians at their heels, smiting with the fury of glutted vengeance. Bossonians and Gundermen were swarming through the camp of their enemies, tearing the tents to pieces in search of plunder, seizing prisoners, ripping open the baggage and upsetting the wagons.

Tarascus cursed fervently, and then shrugged his shoulders, as well as he could, under the circumstances.

"Very well. I have no choice. What are your demands?"

"Surrender to me all your present holdings in Aquilonia. Order your garrisons to march out of the castles and towns they hold, without their arms, and get your infernal armies out of Aquilonia as quickly as possible. In addition you shall return all Aquilonians sold as slaves, and pay an indemnity to be designated later, when the damage your occupation of the country has caused has been properly estimated. You will remain as hostage until these terms have been carried out."

"Very well," surrendered Tarascus. "I will surrender all the castles and towns now held by my garrisons without resistance, and all the other things shall be done. What ransom for my body?"

Conan laughed and removed his foot from his foe's steel-clad breast, grasped his shoulder and heaved him to his feet. He started to speak, then turned to see Hadrathus approaching him. The priest was as calm and self-possessed as ever, picking his way between rows of dead men and horses.

Conan wiped the sweat-smeared dust from his face with a blood-stained hand. He had fought all through the day, first on foot with the pikemen, then in the saddle, leading the charge. His surcoat was gone, his armor splashed with blood and battered with strokes of sword, mace and ax. He loomed gigantically against a background of blood and slaughter, like some grim pagan hero of mythology.

"Well done, Hadrathus!" quoth he gustily. "By Crom, I am glad to see your signal! My knights were almost mad with impatience and eating their hearts out to be at sword-strokes. I could not have held them much longer. What of the wizard?"

"He has gone down the dim road to Acheron," answered Hadrathus. "And I —I am for Tarantia. My work is done here, and I have a task to perform at the temple of Mitra. All our work is done here. On this field we have saved Aquilonia—and more than Aquilonia. Your ride to your capital will be a triumphal procession through a kingdom mad with joy. All Aquilonia will be cheering the return of their king. And so, until we meet again in the great royal hall—farewell!"

Conan stood silently watching the priest as he went. From various parts of the field knights were hurrying toward him. He saw Pallantides, Trocero, Prospero, Servius Galannus, their armor splashed with crimson. The thunder of battle was giving way to a roar of triumph and acclaim. All eyes, hot with strife and shining with exultation, were turned toward the great black figure of the king; mailed arms brandished red-stained swords. A confused torrent of sound rose, deep and thunderous as the sea-surf: *"Hail, Conan, king of Aquilonia!"*

Tarascus spoke.

"You have not yet named my ransom."

Conan laughed and slapped his sword home in its scabbard. He flexed his mighty arms, and ran his blood-stained fingers through his thick black locks, as if feeling there his re-won crown.

"There is a girl in your seraglio named Zenobia."

"Why, yes, so there is."

"Very well." The king smiled as at an exceedingly pleasant memory. "She shall be your ransom, and naught else. I will come to Belverus for her as I promised. She was a slave in Nemedia, but I will make her queen of Aquilonia!"

[THE END]

The Druidic Doom

By ROBERT BLOCH

Two dreadful hands reached out hideously from the yawning pit beneath the Druid stone—a gripping tale of a grisly horror

IT IS written in the chronicles of olden days that the elder lore shall never die. Many savants concur in this view, and though the world may scoff, occasionally there arises some strange and dreadful proof in the shape of a mystery that cannot otherwise be explained. The ancient legends still remain, and they are still believed by the poor and the humble. These will always believe, for there will always be unusual occurrences which neither science nor religion can adequately explain and combat. I do not profess to espouse one side of the argument or another—I can but tell a story which I heard long ago in a land where the dark fables still hold sway.

THEY say on the coast that when Sir Charles Hovoco came to Nedwick he was a proud and wilful man. He had trampled his way into the baronetcy as he had trampled his way in other affairs —business, political, and social. At thirty-eight this grubby, florid citizen was a "self-made" man. He was not, from the accounts I gathered, a likable sort of person. He was too beefy, too matter-of-fact and hard-headed. In his rise from Whitechapel slums to the pinnacle of industrial success there had been little of esthetic endeavor and much of greed and ruthless cunning. Consequently, upon his accession to the Nedwick estates, he had made no attempts to ingratiate himself with the local citizenry, but merely ignored their presence.

This lack of tact was not overlooked by the neighboring rustics in the village. A queer lot they were, steeped in archaic tradition, and not fond of outsiders. They disliked Sir Charles from the start, but they all seemed genuinely sorry for him when they learned of his fate. Some of them, however, seem to imply that there was an element of poetic justice in his tragic demise. If the man had not been so stupid, he would have heeded the warnings they had given him, and the tragedy might never have occurred. But poor Hovoco had merely laughed at their old wives' tales and blundered on upon his predetermined way. Therefore he died, because he did not understand.

When Sir Charles came to Nedwick House he found it in a lamentable state of decay; a condition he proceeded to remedy by importing a crew of artizans from Birmingham and renovating the edifice completely, both without and within. He had the left gable completely demolished, and erected a new wing jutting out from the main hall. Also he installed a heating-system and modern plumbing.

All this did not endear him to the country folk, who cherish the sacred memories of bygone days. To them this bustle of radical activity amounted to sacrilege, and insulted the Nedwicklan traditions. The bland and confident way in which Sir Charles ignored their comments also met with their disfavor. He even had the temerity to order several of the more critical spectators off the prem-

"The bleat of the faun and the shrill squeal of the centaur were heard in the land."

ises, as these worthies stood scrutinizing the laborer's handiwork.

After that a distinct coolness manifested itself between the village and the manor. This coolness extended to the imported help as well, who were hard put to find board and lodging in the town below. Food for the new master was exorbitantly priced, and most carelessly delivered to the back door of the establishment. Sir Charles neither new nor cared. He knew nothing of the townsmen, and very little about his new estate.

Upon the completion of the restoration and the subsequent departure of the laborers, Sir Charles proceeded to remedy his ignorance concerning his recent acquisition. He took long rustic rambles over the moor, and wandered down the narrow lanes that ran between the rocky, stunted acres of pasturage. What he saw did not altogether meet with his approval. The picturesque wildness of this rugged domain failed to please his practical eye. The gnarled trees and scrubby vistas of underbrush were merely impediments to profitable cultivation; the rocky meadows signified only the fact

that the land was not suitable for grazing.

He climbed to the top of a smoke-ringed hill and surveyed his kingdom with a discontented eye. This would never do! Tangled brush and boulder-strewn fields were all very well for the fox-hunting aristocracy, but Sir Charles Hovoco was made of more rational stuff. There was simply no reason for all this fertile land going to waste; with a little clearage these broad acres would yield him quite a tidy sum of money. The fact that he already had plenty of money did not figure in his calculations. Sir Charles did not countenance waste, in any form. Even he, blind as he was, realized the possibilities of objections from the peasantry. He was familiar enough with the time-honored customs which decreed the sacredness of the "right-of-way" through the land of a lord, and which held the violation of such privileges as nothing short of criminal. He vaguely understood how these folk were attached to the soil, and how the desecration of the familiar landmarks and alteration of the customary arrangements might lead to considerable annoyance. But this did not deter him. After all, precedent or no precedent, it was his land. He had paid a pretty price for his eminence, and would continue to render heavy tribute in the form of a sizable tax. The peasantry could go hang! He would go ahead.

BEFORE carrying out this somewhat rash resolution, he made several more inspection tours. It was on the third of these trips that he stumbled upon the altar.

It stood on a forest-ringed hilltop, very near to the moor. He came upon it late in the afternoon, at the conclusion of a long and arduous journey through the more adjacent portions of his property. The surrounding landscape held hints of great antiquity. The trees in the small grove were very thick, and tremendously old. The hoary stumps in the clearing were even more aged. The soil, nevertheless, was incredibly rich; seemingly it had never been tilled. The little hill on which the altar was raised seemed to be particularly fertile, though at present it was given over to a lush crop of mushrooms and toadstools.

The sight of such extravagant laxity irritated Sir Charles. He would have both trees and altar removed immediately.

He climbed the sloping mound and examined the stone that was reared upon it. It was a large boulder, smooth and very white, with a flat, tabled top. This tabled top bore some rusty stains—probably the ravages of the years; for the stone, like the surrounding glade, was very old. Why Hovoco thought so he could not say; it simply seemed to *exude* a quality of age. It was very heavy, and the base was firmly sunk into the sod, but Sir Charles soon decided that the altar was artificially placed. It seemed much too heavy a rock to be indigenous to the spot; the other glacial boulders were much smaller, and were of a distinctly limestone formation. This had obviously been a quarried block, and had probably been moved to this hilltop at some remote date. Once again Sir Charles pondered as to why he believed the altar must be old. He could arrive at no definite conclusion; nor could he assign a reason for his opinion. There was no moss upon the smooth white sides, nor any sign of an inscription. He knelt and searched for one, but in vain.

Meanwhile the sun crept away across the hills, leaving the land in the clutch of a sinister twilight. A violet haze deepened into dusk, and the shadows of the rustling trees crawled slowly across the ground. The altar, once white, glowed

redly for a moment in the flames of an apocalyptic sunset, then purpled like congealing blood upon the advent of darkness. Hovoco's eyes could peer no longer through the hazy gloom. He abandoned his search for an inscription and rose to his feet. Stolidly he faced the sunset for a fleeting instant, then turned for a last look at the altar before descending and retracing his steps homeward. As he did so a shrill breeze arose and chattered mysteriously in the trees. Presently it sank to a slow, sobbing whisper, as if to mourn the dying day. In spite of himself, Hovoco was impressed. The sound was like a voice in a haunted land.

With the coming of darkness, the scene took on an unfamiliar look. The gloomy vistas seemed positively hostile to his presence, as if the entire countryside knew of Sir Charles' plans, and hated him because of what he meant to do. The doomed trees sighed, and stretched withered arms to the sky as if invoking vengeance against their enemy. The boulders loomed menacingly in the night, and the pastures beckoned him off into mystic mazes whence he would never return.

The very wind threatened him with its chill voice. Instinctively, the baronet shivered. Gloomy fancies! For a moment his eyes returned to the altar. It squatted there in the darkness, and seemed to brood like a sentient thing.

Sir Charles shrugged, then descended the hill and stalked off into the night. Once he glanced back over his shoulder. A last tiny ray of sunset light was leering over the top of the hill. It fell directly upon the center of the altar, and to Hovoco's startled eye it looked like a pool of blood.

Hastily Sir Charles turned away. But he walked home very briskly, and he did not look back any more. He was getting nervous.

2

With the coming of daylight, the new baronet recovered some of his accustomed aplomb. He spent the forenoon in the village, much to the natives' surprize. He dropped into the local tavern and had a glass of stout, leaning nonchalantly against the bar and wholly disregarding the unfriendly stares of the loungers beside him. After a pointed silence, during which he was uncomfortably scrutinized by the poker-faced bartender, Sir Charles abruptly addressed that worthy, and inquired where he could procure some workmen in the village to assist him in putting his land in shape.

After an astonished bit of cogitation mine host asked him just what type of work he contemplated. Hovoco explained that he wanted to clear off his land to render it suitable for cultivation. He wanted some men to cut down the useless trees, and remove the numerous stones that encumbered the fields. After that there would be rabbit-warrens to be destroyed, and birds to be killed. And, of course, there was that queer old altar off by the moorland. He would have that removed immediately.

The bartender gazed at him for a moment in apoplectic silence. Then he bluntly informed the baronet that no man in the village would think of doing such things. They would not assist in the destruction of the old landmarks, and they most certainly would not go near the altar under any circumstances. Being a newcomer, Sir Charles would not know, but the altar was generally regarded as something to shun. It had an unhealthy reputation in these parts, and always had been looked upon as a blight and a curse. No one knew how long it had stood off in those woods, nor how many had died in the old days when the drums had sounded

from the hill. Wise folk said that the pagans had their dances there, and there was still talk of the old rites being celebrated on May Eve, and certain autumn nights. Bullocks had been led up that slope and given to Those who were worshipped, and some folk said that they still were. There always were a lot of farm people absent from their homes on special evenings, and without any excuses to offer the next day to the rest of the people, who had sense enough to stay indoors when the fire burned up on the hill. No, the altar was a good thing to stay away from. The grandsires could tell some wild stories on winter nights about disappearances and deaths that had never been rightly explained. They didn't generally say much before outsiders, but even Reverend Dobson, the clergyman, knew about the hill. What he probably was not aware of was the fact that some of his most loyal parishioners attended the furtive conclaves around the altar on the special nights, and carried secret charms that were handed down within their families from the days when the pagan folk ruled in the land. Therefore, the bartender was of the earnest opinion that Sir Charles should keep his hands off, and carefully avoid even the mention of the altar or hill-top, and that under no circumstances should he foolishly attempt to destroy it. There would be trouble if he did.

At the conclusion of the innkeeper's advice, Sir Charles left the tavern, without saying a word. He was obstinate in his conviction, and he would not be balked by the ignorant chatter of these yokels. Their silly superstitious prattle disgusted him, and their obvious unfriendly attitude wounded his city-bred pride. He would show them! He marched up to the local drug-store and put through a telephone call to Birmingham. Here he engaged two workmen to come out immediately and assist him in clearing off his property. This settled, he walked calmly out into the street. Tomorrow they would be here, and then he would give these country clods something to gabble about.

Meanwhile he was still human enough to entertain a keen curiosity concerning the details of the fantastic legendry which clustered about the altar on the hill. Accordingly he directed his footsteps toward the modest rectory where dwelt the local parson, the aforementioned Reverend Dobson.

He found that gentleman in his study, and introduced himself. The Reverend was a tall, wiry sort of man, with a shrewd face that was curiously counterbalanced by keen and sensitive eyes. Looking at his features, one thought of a successful broker, but a glimpse of his eyes betrayed the dreamer and the saint. The Reverend also proved to be a courteous gentleman. He so pleasantly engaged the new baronet in conversation that Sir Charles nearly forgot his errand. It was suppertime when he brought the matter around to his problem, and the clergyman hospitably urged him to stay. Hovoco consented, and they passed a pleasant mealtime in the dining-room, served by the housekeeper in a style befitting the rank of the honored guest. Afterward the gentlemen adjourned once more to the study, and indulged in a glass of sherry.

The courtesy of this reception salved the baronet's wounded ego, and in consequence he was very tactful in the way he broached the subject of the altar. He got it out at last, and managed to make his query seem merely the prompting of a curious interest he took in his estate.

The Reverend was very willing to help. He had spent a good deal of time in looking up local customs and bits of wayside legendry, and a little archeological research coupled with this knowledge had given him a good deal of the altar's history. This he would gladly impart to his guest.

The altar, he informed his visitor, was extremely ancient. While no exact date could be discovered, the time of its erection could probably be determined correctly enough by the chronology of the legends concerning it. The first tales were of pre-Celtic antiquity. When the local migratory streams had converged and set up a village upon the land, the altar was already placed. The stories had been handed down almost directly from this very remote time to the present, in a steady stream. Early myths spoke of the altar as being the gathering-place of an extremely repulsive barbarian race—short, swarthy savages, whose dwarfed priests sacrificed to the moon. They had many ceremonials, and in their warfare with the Celtic invaders they used their captives for these sanguinary rites. Eventually, through tracing the stories a bit further, one finds the primitive dark people dying out and retiring to the hills. Eventually they abandoned their claims altogether, and disappeared. For a long while following, the altar stood deserted. Then came a curious survival.

The Druids rose. Bearded vates and garlanded bards chanted their litanies to the gods of the forest. Oaks and hemlocks rose beside the altar, and a crescent-shaped grotto was erected in the glade. Here dwelt the Wise Ones who knew the secrets of the hills and called strange voices out of the earth by beating upon the great drums, or scattering pungent incense before the night-fires. To the shrill pipings of lutes they did adoration to the Dark Flame, and with the hemlock they invoked the hamadryads and the nymphs of the forest. They ruled supreme, and all the countryside bowed and obeyed. Their magical rites insured fertility, and increased the strength of their people. Rich offerings of blood were made in ever-increasing abundance, and the bleat of the faun and the shrill squeal of the centaur were heard in the land. Blood, blood, blood — ever the offering and the sacrifice—crimson drops dripping from knife-blades, dabbling the sacred robes and staining the gray beards of the elders, or trickling from the base of the altar to dye the earth with the color of life.

The iron legions of Rome thundered their way across the land. The gods of the forest were invoked in vain. They could not halt the legions. A garrison was stationed near by, and the Druids retired to their haunts in the moors. Roman customs were imposed, and the conquered ones began to turn from the old ways. Soon there was a gradual intermingling between the invaders and the natives, and a town sprang up around the garrison. Fresh arrivals came from Roman provinces across the sea, and they brought new gods to both the soldiers and the people. Cybele, Astarte, Aphrodite, and the Magna Mater were introduced, and the ways of their worship were explained and demonstrated.

Some of these rituals were very dreadful indeed, and there was need to hide them from over-curious official eyes. So the altar on the hill became a rendezvous once again. Here anthropomancy, hydromancy and animal-worship were carried out, and more blood tainted the night-wind from the hill. To the clashing of cymbals and the piercing ecstasy of the sacred conchs the nude worshippers danced in honor of the perverted gods

that came from the orient lands. There were obscene images on the altar now, and mad orgies followed the initial sacrifice.

For a time the new faith prospered, and its followers grew still more abandoned in their lewdness. But one night there came a thunder across the hills, and the moonlight suddenly faded into a howling darkness. Then, while the worshippers frantically fled from that accursed and awful hilltop, a Voice shrieked a dreadful summons from afar, and the priests of the degraded cult screamed and died. The rest of the frightened congregation, men and women, soldiers and townsfolk alike, rushed into the forest. Here horror barred their way, for as the echo of that monstrous voice died away, the trees suddenly *came alive!* They swooped down upon the fugitives with tentacled branches, seizing the terrified debauchees and raising them up to the midnight sky; then dropped them to the earth below. A sudden gale had arisen, which effectively muffled their hysterical screams; so that it was not until a few straggling, half-insane fellows rushed into the town that the catastrophe was made known. The storm had meanwhile risen to such fury that it was impossible for any of the troops to venture forth again, and the story that the escaping worshippers had to tell did not encourage them in attempting any such expedition.

The next day dawned, and an immediate search was made, but no bodies were ever discovered. The trees were again in their proper places, and there were no indications of any violent upheaval. The altar was serene and silent, and there were no littered remnants of the sacrifices to be seen. The torches, gongs, and other symbols had disappeared, and the sun beamed down upon a scene of pastoral tranquillity. Finally one of the searching soldiers happened to notice the top of the altar. There, squarely in the center of the tabled surface, lay a single sprig of hemlock.

After this incident, recorded in the chronicles by local scribes, but for political reasons never relayed back to Rome, there were no further disturbances about the altar. The missing people never returned, and the few survivors who retained their sanity were of the belief that it was for the best. Though the affair may have been a result of sympathetic mass-hallucination, nobody could deny that the disputed supernatural happenings had brought some hideously tangible results. The altar was best left alone, and the land about it was never encroached upon.

Thereafter they had a healthy respect for the Druids, and not a little fear of them. There were many things about these dark moorland ways that could not be satisfactorily explained, and many obscure caves and hidden glens that were wisely left unexplored. Bearded oldsters in white robes occasionally appeared in some of the outlying villages, and the foreign soldiers were very cautious not to molest them, or hinder them in their comings and goings. For now the pompous conquerors knew better than to scoff at the dark ways of a land they did not understand. When reports came to them about the drums and pipes that echoed from the inaccessible forests on the moor they turned deaf ears. They did not care to hear that awful Voice, or see all nature metamorphosed into a maze of menace.

At last the legions marched away, almost as suddenly as they had come. With their departure things once more assumed their normal condition. The town still remained, but when the bearded ones trickled back from their hiding-

places, the old ways again held sway. The rites were resumed, and those who were sufficiently Romanized to object were mysteriously captured and burned in wicker cages upon the hills. After that the silent priestcraft reigned undisputed, and their gods did not lack for ruddy nourishment.

Gradually, however, the rites decayed. Fierce barbarian tribes ravaged the countryside. Anglo-Saxons ruled, and for the Druids they showed no mercy. They had their gods, too, and they were strong. There was no recurrence of the inexplicable phenomenon that had befallen the Roman devotees. What happened when the newcomers met the old ones in conflict has never been told. The manuscripts that Reverend Dobson possessed were strangely silent on this point. All that he had been able to learn was that in some curious way the Druidic priests suddenly disappeared. The grim invaders were unable to find them, though they were unafraid when it came to thoroughly exploring every portion of the forbiding countryside. There was one last mighty ceremony from the altar on the hill, and the next day they were gone. The tribesmen combed the moors in vain. Then they cut down the oaks and the hemlocks, destroyed the crescent-glade, and let matters rest. The altar they were unable to remove, though attempts were undoubtedly made. Accounts are unnaturally hazy on this point, also.

Centuries passed. Gradually Christianity was introduced. The refining influences of civilization descended upon the land. A priory was erected near by. It was the good monks who chronicled the history of the surrounding regions, and they had likewise recorded the history of the altar. The latter they seemed to have avoided, though now only legend remained to warn them away. There were no repetitions of the archaic rites, and no disquieting evidences to encourage this avoidance, but nevertheless there were no attempts made to raze the pagan stone.

A new abomination rose and flourished later on. Returning knights from the Crusader citadels of Malta, Rhodes, and Cyprus established themselves in the priory. They brought with them the degenerate creeds of Satanism, and there were loathsome rumors of a Black Mass. By now the country-folk were pious, and their simple concepts of religious reverence were outraged by the warrior bishops who ruled from within the walls of the monastery and abbey. Once again there was talk of Pan, and satyrs and oreads haunted the gloomy groves, or tittered across the lonely moor at twilight. Once again there was blood on the altar, and queer processions visited the hill on sacred nights. Still the Druids were not forgotten. Though the oaks were gone, and other gods were worshipped at their sanctuary, the peasants remembered the old tales, and feared the ancient horror more than they did the new.

The new passed. Henry VIII's minions swept down upon the robber bishops, and one night the priory disappeared in a red holocaust of flame. The next day the soldiers rode away, leaving only the dead behind them. They did not speak of what they found within the priory walls, nor did they venture near the altar, but it is recorded that their faces were deathly pale in the morning light.

The next night the villagers heard a faint drumming on the hilltop, and for a moment a tiny flame flickered and died. That was all, but it was enough. The Druids still reigned. Men might come and go, kingdoms rise and fall, but the old ways still remained in the secret places.

BARON NEDWICK won his spurs and his land under good Queen Bess. A castle rose at Nedwick, and hunters galloped across the verdant fields. The Nedwick line had prospered, and won esteem from village and countryside alike. Part of this estimation was due to the fact that they asked no questions about the altar, and did not hunt too far upon the moorland.

By now the altar was being used once again, but this time by the rustics themselves. Certain old women were known to have the gift of prophecy, and the dubious repute of possessing the evil eye. Oftentimes they retired to rude huts upon the moor, and consulted their familiars before the altar on the hill. Sometimes there was need of blood, and those that came to them for help were not averse to donating a heifer or a goat. By now the place was known throughout the land for what it was, and none but the followers of witchcraft and sorcery ever ventured near it. On certain nights these people were known to make use of it, but there were other nights when it appeared deserted, and a queer drumming was faintly heard from afar. Then even the witches were afraid, for they too knew and respected the olden tales.

There is little more to say. The witches passed, and once again the altar came into its own. Every so often some old rumor was momentarily revived upon the discovery of fresh stains on the altar-top, or the fancied sound of nocturnal drumming from the hill; but in the opinion of the majority, it was now fairly safe to examine the spot. At certain seasons there were occasional sacrifices made quietly, but these were publicly disavowed by the more enlightened elements of the local population. Even so, the inhabitants still had their suspicions, and when the last of the Nedwicks died there had been a secret meeting on the hill.

The clergyman concluded his remarks by referring Sir Charles to the volumes he owned which dealt with the surrounding countryside; many of these contained references to the matter. Then he added a little advice. He was a man of God, he said, but even the Bible recognizes the Spirit of Evil. There was something wrong about that altar and the surrounding groves, something quite unsavory. There had been too much blood spilt, too many unhallowed prayers. Throughout all its history the ancient Druidic rites had played a part, and the vates were evil men. As a close student of the Stonehenge legend, and other such manifestations of the Druid powers, Reverend Dobson was led to believe that their sway had not yet altogether ceased. Somewhere, in some place, there was a survival. There was still worship under the horns of the crescent. For this reason, although he was not ordinarily a superstitious man, the clergyman earnestly warned Sir Charles that he would do best to keep away from that portion of his land upon which the stone stood.

Hovoco thanked him for his narrative, and turned the talk to other fields. An hour later he departed, bidding the Reverend Mr. Dobson a pleasant good-evening. As he strode off into the night, however, his face became a mask of scowling determination. Druid humbug! The clergyman, for all his hospitality, was nothing but a credulous fool. The altar must go.

3

MORNING heralded the arrival of the two workingmen from Birmingham. Mr. Joseph Gauer and Mr. Sam Williams were sturdy, matter-of-fact souls, with a hearty dislike of the rural simpletons and their ways. Even so, Sir Charles thought it wise not to inform them as to the na-

ture of the stone he ordered them to destroy. He did, however, accompany them to the spot to superintend their work. They procured tools from the battered car in which they came, and started off at a brisk pace over the meadows. It was a beautiful day. When they came to the grove they saw the altar clearly outlined against the blue background of sky. There was nothing sinister or disturbing about it in the least, for which fact Sir Charles was secretly very glad.

The two men set to work with a will. The task was difficult. First they dug around the base, spading up the firm earth until a narrow trench surrounded the stone. Then they began to use the picks, and finally the spades again. Sir Charles was surprized at the depth of the rock; it had been imbedded many feet. At last, however, their task was concluded. Using the picks as levers, they pried the great boulder loose, and with a tremendous heave, lifted it ponderously to one side. Then Sir Charles received a shock.

There was no ground beneath! Instead, a gigantic hole yawned where the stone had rested, and from it rose a putrid stench as of a thing long dead. The opening was circular, and very deep. A glimpse into the orifice did not reveal the bottom. A stone cast into the depths rebounded noiselessly from the earthen sides, and there was no sound to indicate how far it must have fallen.

Sir Charles bravely struggled to retain his composure at this unexpected revelation, and told the workmen to retire for the day. When they asked him about the hole, he informed them that in his opinion the thing was a former well, probably dry, whose shaft had been walled up. Then he hurriedly dismissed them, for he did not care to answer any further questions, or be asked to account for the nauseous odor that was still seeping from the gaping pit.

The men withdrew, and Sir Charles followed them at a distance. For the first time he was beginning to feel really afraid. He was forced to check a sudden impulse to recall the men and order them to replace the stone. Then he repressed the urge savagely. They would think him a fool, and he did not dare admit his fear, even to himself. Better to let them go. He watched them as they went off to find temporary lodging in the village, but all the while he was conscious of a black imp of anxiety tugging at his soul. At length he forced himself to go back to the manor and read, but he was far from feeling at his ease.

By midafternoon he was so restless that he decided to run down to the city for the evening. He got out the car and left in time to arrive before the last rays of sunset. He did not want to be alone after dark right now. He spent the evening at a cabaret, and the night at a hotel, taking great pains not to be unaccompanied.

It must have been close to noon when he at last drove back into the village, his former composure now completely restored. But not for long. There was horrible news for him at the little town.

Gauer and Williams were gone. Not just disappeared, but gone for ever. The story was simple. The tavern-keeper told him, with a touch of righteousness not unmixed with pity in his voice.

The two men had come into his place the afternoon before, to find rooms for a few days. The owner of the pub, not knowing, of course, the reason for their presence, had found room for them; though had he any inkling of their business he would have ordered them from his doors. The two men, once lodged, reappeared in the tavern below to get

their evening meals. At first they held themselves aloof from the local habitués of the establishment, but after their supper they indulged in a few glasses of ale, and a gin-and-bitters. This encouraged them to let down their barrier of reserve, and look with more tolerance upon the friendly gathering that assembled for a nightly session about eight that evening. Soon the two men had introduced themselves by name, and became absorbed in the general conversation. One thing led to another, and by ten or so the jolly loungers were becoming tipsy. The two city men had bought several rounds for the assemblage, and the house had reciprocated in kind. All in all, it was a very pleasant and friendly little chat on things political, social, and economic.

The bar-keep admitted to having several stiff drinks under his belt by this time, and in consequence he could not rightly testify to the events immediately precipitating the quarrel. It is quite evident, however, that somehow one of the men had unwittingly let slip the casual information that he and his companion were here at the behest of Sir Charles Hovoco, for the purpose of reclaiming his land. They were, of course, totally ignorant of the general attitude on this affair, and were very surprized indeed by the reception accorded this statement. Several of their listeners had been among those present when Sir Charles had been there the afternoon before, and they took the lead in denouncing the two workmen for their contemplated part in the affair.

Here Gauer made another break. Testily he retorted that he, for one, didn't see what all this fuss was about—why, all they had done today, for example, was to dig up an old stone on a hill, and uncover some kind of abandoned well.

IMMEDIATELY following this shocking revelation came a storm of horrified denunciation. No good would come of such doings; the Old Ones were not to be disturbed, nor their dwellings violated. A foul murrain upon such doings! There was a good deal of excited conjecture over the discovery that there was a shaft beneath the altar. God alone knew how old the stone was, and only the Devil could tell who burrowed the pit beneath it. Some wheezing oldster whispered a bit of ancient gossip about the Druidic days; his grandsire had once spoken about the Druids worshipping before the altar as a *gateway*, and what could they mean but the passage or fissure beneath its base? The story about the Voice was revived, too—had it not come *out of the earth?* When the bards had disappeared, *where had they gone to?* The old ways still remain. It was a dangerous sacrilege that these men had committed, and only ill would come of it.

To this and similar statements the two laborers retorted in words of scorn and contempt. They would not be frightened by such bogy-man tales as these. They were not simple, superstitious country Reubens; they came from the city, where such foolish fancies were properly ignored. They did not believe in the stories, and furthermore they boldly expressed their crude opinions of any yokels who upheld such obvious falsehoods. The Druids, or whatever they were called, were nothing but myths. Perhaps some ignorant rustics had sacrificed animals on the altar? What of it? They were not afraid.

This drunken bickering continued to its tragic conclusion. One of the farmers, a grizzled simpleton named Leftwich, challenged the visitors' bluff. He offered to put up a pound note that the two of them would not dare to venture that very night upon the hill where the altar stood.

The bet was immediately taken, despite the warnings that the aroused innkeeper offered. The dangers of such an undertaking were ridiculed by the intoxicated non-believers, and after another round of drinks they started off, accompanied to the pasture nearest the hilltop by the farmer who had made the proposal. From there the two went on alone, teetering slowly across the field with borrowed lanterns in their hands and a ribald song upon their lips.

The farmer stood watching them for a moment; then, suddenly, the moon went behind a cloud and the wind gave a sudden peal of mocking laughter. A strange horripilation assailed the now-sobered man, and unable to control his inexplicable terror, he hastily withdrew. As he did so he noticed that the faint notes of the song had died away, and the figures were lost to view in the blackness of the clouded night. All at once he found himself racing back in the direction of the village to get help. As he panted down the road he heard a booming from behind him, like the voice of muffled thunder. After that there was a piercing scream, then silence.

Breathlessly he ran into the village street, and re-entered the tavern. Ten minutes later a band of grim and earnest men streamed in a torchlight procession out of the little town and down the long road to the hills below the moor. The moon had reappeared, and when they reached the base of the pasture where the two workmen had cut across, they could see the top of the altar-mound quite plainly in the silver light. It was bare. The two men were nowhere to be seen. A few of the more daring volunteered to venture to the summit, while the rest combed the surrounding meadowland.

An hour later the party reassembled, and the delegation from the hill had a report. The men were not there now, but they had been. Perhaps the best idea of what happened to them could be gathered from the fact that one of their hats had been discovered not three feet from the opening below the altar-piece. The grass upon the hilltop was curiously trampled, and though there were definite tracks in the dewy grass which led up to the summit, there were no footprints going down. That was all.

Sir Charles heard this story with incredulous mien. "Dreadful," he said. "Dreadful, but perfectly natural. The two fools were drunk. They reached the top, overbalanced, and fell in. For that matter, you and Leftwich are almost legally responsible for countenancing such a stupid and outlandish wager. This affair will have to be thoroughly investigated and reported now, and may cause no end of trouble. I shall have to summon the police tomorrow, and I warn you I shall hold you and your companions morally responsible for this unfortunate occurrence. Good day!"

The baronet turned on his heel and moved rapidly in the direction of Nedwick Hall. He was never seen in the village again.

The rest of the story was told by the Reverend Dobson, and it is to this clergyman that the responsibility goes for its authenticity. Sir Charles disappeared into his study at the Hall immediately upon entering it. What went on in there between two in the afternoon and nine in the evening we shall never know. Did he at last come around to a belief in the macabre causes of the tragedy? Did his tormenting conscience urge him to make an atonement? Nobody can say. Whatever his feelings, he is known to have left the house at nine, hastily, without speaking to the servants or accounting for

his actions in any way. He was haggard and disheveled, but he almost ran down the road in the direction of the clergyman's abode. He never went in. Whatever his purpose in coming, he changed his mind at the last moment.

It was then, as he stood hesitant upon the doorstep, that Dobson, glancing out of the window, saw his tortured face. He watched Sir Charles as he turned, and with a shudder of inward agony, began to hasten back down the road along which he had come. Thinking he might be ill, the clergyman hastily put on his hat and followed him. But even as he hurried after the retreating baronet, Dobson was forced to revise his opinion. No sick man could set so brisk a pace. For a moment the reverend gentleman was minded to retrace his steps, but the mystery of his guest's peculiar behavior drove him on.

Suddenly Sir Charles left the road and began to cut across the open country behind the village. He no longer walked erect. Instead, he seemed to *lope*. It was as if he were ashamed of being seen, and yet in a hurry to reach his destination. It was frightening to see him scurry across the fields, like some great, misshapen animal. When he saw this, Dobson was prompted to call out to Hovoco, but he refrained. For a long while they continued in silence.

Sir Charles skulked ahead, never once looking back. His eyes were set upon the grove of trees and the little hill, and his body moved as if under the spell of some unnatural compulsion. Was he going to investigate the rumors for himself? Or was he being *forced* to go? He seemed unable to stop, and now, lanternless, and without a guide, he was racing over the rocky field that led to the trees.

Dobson followed as speedily as he could. He was still several hundred yards behind, however, when the hurrying figure of the baronet disappeared amid the grove of twisted trees. The Reverend strained his muscles in pursuit, striving to overtake his man before Hovoco reached the top of the hill; for it was by now hideously evident that that was his objective. As Dobson entered the little glen, the moon disappeared, and his quarry faded from sight. He strained his ears to detect the sound of footsteps in the darkness ahead, but in vain. Instead there was another sound.

A drumming in the earth. The ground beneath his feet began to seethe with muted sound; a hellish drone of muffled beats rose upon his ears. He stumbled through the blackness, the ghastly thunder raging in the very depths of his being. If only he could reach that hill in time! Sir Charles was being lured to his doom, just as the blundering workmen had been snared. The Old Ones were about to claim their own!

Choking and gasping for lack of breath, the clergyman emerged at last at the base of the little hill on which the altar lay. His eyes pierced the blackness and sought out the blurred form of the baronet. He was nearly at the summit now, and the drums were yammering from within the very hillside itself. To Dobson's watching eyes came the maddening vision of Sir Charles Hovoco on all fours, frantically running up the slope with a bestial eagerness apparent in the very outlines of his body. As he covered the final slope the drums suddenly ceased.

For a moment there was silence, and Dobson saw the baronet, risen to his full height, gazing as if entranced into the black pit at his feet. Then came a single nightmare scream from Sir Charles' foaming lips, and a second later his feet began to slide along the ground toward the great gaping mouth of the opening. Then, as the scream died in his throat, the

moon came out, and for an instant his straining body was clearly outlined against the leering sky. Then it toppled forward and disappeared into the black burrow below. But in that instant the Reverend Dobson had seen that which sent him reeling from the accursed spot; had seen in the silvery moonlight *the clutching hands from the pit that had grasped Sir Charles by his ankles and were dragging him to his doom.*

THAT'S the story. Dobson swears to it, and those in the village who know are inclined to believe. Outsiders have been told that the three deaths were due to accidental suicide, and this plausible and sane surmise has been officially accepted. Another man occupies the Hall today, and he knows enough to keep his hands off what he does not understand. The natives have relapsed into a careful silence, and discourage all references to the altar, the glade on the hillside, or the legends of the Druids. They hope, in time, that the affair will be forgotten, and already they are beginning to deny any belief in the truth of the ancient lore.

But this has not prevented them from carefully replacing the altar over that ominous opening on the hill, and carefully bathing it from time to time with fresh, rich blood.

The Sick Muse

By CHARLES P. BAUDELAIRE*

Alas for thee, poor Muse! Thy caverned eyes at dawn
With visions from the baleful night are peopled still,
And I by turns behold, across thy pallor drawn,
Thy folly and thy horror, taciturn and chill.

Have the rose goblin and the greenish succubus
Poured on thee fear and fearful passion from their urn?
Or has the nightmare's arm, stubborn and tyrannous,
Too deeply drowned thee in some fabulous Minturne?

I would an odor of health and happiness exhaled
From out thy breast, whereon strong thoughts alone prevailed;
I would thy Christian blood, thy pulses wild or weak,

Ran like the numbered sound of syllables antique,
When Phœbus, lord of song, maintained in alternation
With Pan the harvest-lord his equal domination.

* Translated by Clark Ashton Smith from the French.

The Call in the Night

By CHANDLER H. WHIPPLE

Who was the grinning figure that sat in George Beldon's chair and calmly talked with the man who had come to murder him? An eery tale of two racketeers

IT WON'T do any good to tell you this now, and I know I must have been kind of screwy that night, and maybe for a whole week before; but I've got to tell it, anyhow, just the way it happened to me. . . .

It was all dark in the room, and from right beside my bed the sound came, shrill and jangling, making me shake all over and setting the hairs of my head on end. It was my telephone ringing—after a minute I knew that—but that didn't calm me much. There's a way a phone has of ringing, out of darkness and night, that stops your heart and tightens every nerve you've got.

After a second I reached over and answered it. I didn't recognize the voice. It sounded hollow and hoarse, unnatural.

"You'd better clear out, Joe Clemens," the voice said. "Somebody just murdered George Beldon—and they'll blame it on you. . . ."

After that, the phone clicked off. I shouted into it, screamed into it—but the owner of that voice had hung up on me. I was shaking like a leaf and cold as ice.

Good God! They couldn't kill Beldon! If they got him — no matter who — I'd burn for it. Those records he had in his safe . . . no alibi I could think up would do me any good. . . . And the deal Beldon and I were working — it was going to leave me sitting pretty. It was going to fix me for life. Better than that, it would ruin Sam Howerton. It had to go through. But it couldn't if Beldon was dead.

Then, all at once, I thought I knew whose voice that had been on the phone. I was sure it was Sam Howerton's.

That last shock woke me up. . . .

WHEN I first came awake, I didn't know I'd been dreaming. I was sweating all over, and my breath was still choked up in my throat. I looked into the darkness of my bedroom; the thin shafts of moonlight were horrible, moving shapes. For a minute I didn't dare move; I lay there waiting—waiting as if I knew something was coming for me and would get me if I made a sound.

Then I got my senses back. I kind of sunk back on the pillow and drew a long breath. I laughed. The laugh sounded sort of hollow, but it did me good. I'd dreamed the whole thing, I knew now; it had been just another nightmare. I'd had a few of them already, that week, and it wasn't any wonder—not with as much at stake as I had right now. . . .

Still, I wasn't quite sure. . . . Hadn't I heard the telephone jingle, like it does right after you hang up, just as I came awake? Couldn't I still hear that voice in my ears?

Or maybe the phone had rung, even though I hadn't answered it. Maybe its ringing was what woke me up, and in a sort of backward fashion had caused the dream. Maybe it was even Beldon, calling me up about the traction deal, for some reason or other. I ought to find out.

I reached over and picked up the phone, half hoping there'd be someone

on at the other end of the wire, and at the same time afraid there would be. But if anyone had been trying to get me, they had given it up. The wire was singing, and right off Central started yelling at me. I hung up.

I lay there awhile, thinking about it. I felt shaky, again; and the words of that voice in the dream kept ringing in my ears: "You'd better clear out, Joe Clemens. Somebody just murdered George Beldon, and they'll blame it on you."

Supposing somebody had murdered Beldon? . . . Or supposing somebody was going to, tonight, and I had dreamed the thing as a warning? . . . I'm not superstitious, much, but you hear these stories about how a person gets a warning sometimes, in a dream, and it turns out to be straight—and when you wake up in the middle of the night, all clammy cold and with an eery voice still ringing in your ears, it's not hard to believe that such things happen.

I got up and turned on the light. I began to dress. I had to go over and see Beldon, anyhow. . . .

It was a long way to be walking from my apartment-house to Beldon's, especially at three o'clock in the morning; but I didn't call a cab. I didn't go up to the next block and get my car out of the garage, either. It wasn't the time to do anything like that. Supposing something had happened to Beldon—I didn't want anybody identifying me next day as having gone to see him, or having even left my house. I walked.

I had plenty to think about during that walk. It wasn't that I had any kind feelings toward Beldon. I hated him. There was only one man I hated worse, and that was Sam Howerton; I'd hated him ever since we were kids together down at P. S. Fourteen, and he was the one that got the girl I wanted.

This business of Beldon had to do with Howerton, too. Beldon, you see, was my lawyer. He was my fixer, and a damned clever one. I had rigged up that traction deal, but he was the one that could put it through, right past the sanctimonious noses of the City Fathers. Why, the thing would make me rich, and never a comeback from the town—not with Beldon doing the fixing. Why, after that I could clean up and clear out of town and live off the fat of the land the rest of my days! That was what I aimed to do, too—take it easy and have no more worries like this one. . . .

Better than that even, though, was what it would do to Sam Howerton. It would ruin him. Sanctimonious fool that he was, he figured that the new lines would go through where they ought to go—and he'd sunk every cent he had in property out that way! So while I was cleaning up, at the same time I'd fix the one man I hated worst of all. It was worth a lifetime's work—and it hadn't taken but two months! . . .

Of course, I wouldn't really clean up as big as I figured. Beldon would see to that. He always did. Just as I thought I was in the money, and had paid him what he'd said would be his share, he always came up to me, quiet and smooth and leering-like, and said: "Well, Joe, just between friends, I could use, say, about ten thousand. . . ."

"Damn you!" I'd snarl; "didn't you get your cut? Didn't I give you all you asked?"

He'd spread his wide hands and wrinkle up his oily face, as if he was really mighty sorry. "But this deal," he'd say; "expenses have run so high. I simply can't make ends meet, Joe—I simply can't, just between friends. . . ."

"Friends!" I'd say. "Why, damn you, Beldon!" I'd be hot all over, and I'd sneak up to him with my hands twisting

and untwisting, thinking of how I could put those hands around his throat.

He'd laugh in my face. "You know, Joe," he'd say, "good friends as we are, sometimes I think you'd like to kill me. Yes, sir, sometimes I do. But it would go hard with you, Joe—it would go mighty hard with you. . . ." He'd smile, very soft, and, if we were in his apartment, point to his combination safe that had a time-lock on it, that nobody could open but him. "You see, Joe," he'd say then, "you've done a lot of things that I know about. I've got them all written down there, in black and white. If I were to die suddenly, the police would have to have a look at the papers in that safe. It would look bad for you, Joe—mighty bad. . . ." And then he'd laugh again, that high, horrible sort of laugh that he had.

He'd said something like that again, just the other day; then he'd added: "Well, Joe, sometimes I wonder—which one of us will get the other first?"

He'd laughed then, like it was a big joke—but it made me plenty nervous. Was he aiming to pull a fast one when the deal was finished—just when I was figuring to clear out of the whole mess?

It wasn't any wonder I'd been having nightmares lately. This deal had to go through; in spite of Beldon I'd clean up plenty, and it would finish Howerton; it had to work. Afterward, maybe, I could find a way to settle with Beldon for good. . . .

Hell, they couldn't kill Beldon now! Supposing they had, with those things in the safe! Supposing they were trying to, and that message had come as a kind of spiritual warning! I started walking faster. . . .

There was only once on that walk that I stopped short. I almost turned back then as a thought struck me. Supposing the thing had really happened? Supposing Sam Howerton had killed Beldon, or had him killed, and then called me up, figuring I'd run over there, right into a trap?

But I laughed that off, shaky as I felt. Sam Howerton wouldn't ever kill anybody. He wouldn't even frame anybody. He was too much of a churchman for that. . . .

I didn't like it, though, walking over there. I never could figure why Beldon, with all the money he had salted down, kept on living over by the river in that dingy old brownstone. Here the streets are narrow and dark. Between the wharves and the El they don't worry much about street-lamps—and even the cops are pretty far apart. I guess they figure the place isn't any too safe for them. . . .

What with the dream I'd had and the thoughts I'd been thinking, I could imagine a lot of things, and all of them spooky. There might be a heist guy in most any one of those doorways. I was glad I'd stuck a rod in my topcoat pocket, and a blackjack too. I kept my hand on the rod all the time.

When I finally got to the doorway of the brownstone where Beldon lived, I guess I was actually trembling. Maybe, for that matter, I hadn't really stopped since I woke up with that voice ringing in my ears.

I rang the bell and waited. Beldon had the first floor of the house, and I expected it would be him that opened the door. I squinted through the glass, thinking I'd see him shuffling up to turn the knob; but it was all dark in there and I couldn't see a thing. He could have come around the stairs from the rear door that led to the kitchen, anyway, and I wouldn't have seen him; but now, I couldn't even have seen him if he had

come out the front door, right by the entrance.

I didn't even hear a sound. I rang again, hard. I waited a long time. Still nobody showed up, and no lights came on.

I began to get pretty scared. Supposing the whole thing had been true? Supposing Beldon was——

Quiet as I could, I turned the knob of the door.

It opened. I shoved it back a little farther.

Then, suddenly, I got all cold again. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up straight. Because all at once *I knew there was somebody behind that door!* . . .

At first I didn't see him or hear him; but I knew he was there, just as if it had been whispered to me—and I knew he was waiting for me. After that, I could hear his breathing—or at least I thought I could. It came short and sharp, anxious-like.

I had a bad minute. I was shaking all over. I felt like I was trapped—like the whole thing had been planned to get me here and trap me. But I calmed myself down finally. After all, I couldn't stop now; I couldn't turn and run. Because whatever else was true, I knew now that what I'd dreamed had really happened—that someone had killed George Beldon. And I knew that it was his murderer, just making a getaway, that stood behind that door.

I had to get him. I had to lay him out, so I'd have him for evidence. Otherwise, those things in Beldon's safe would make me burn. . . . I shifted my hand from gun to blackjack and brought it out. At close quarters it would work better. I moved the door farther back, this time fast. . . .

He came for me, just as I went for him. He could see me, a little, and I couldn't see him at first, and that gave him some advantage; but at the same time he didn't figure I knew he was there—and that gave me some advantage. I used it.

I hit him hard, driving him back toward the wall. At the same time, my blackjack swished down toward his skull.

He must have hit the wall at the same time that the blackjack hit him. I heard a cracking noise. Yanking at the blackjack, I realized that it had kind of stuck between his head and the wall—but his head hit the wall just the same, and hard.

I hadn't figured to drive him back so hard. I stepped back, sort of startled. He slumped straight down to the floor. I knew then that I'd killed him.

I was scared for a minute. I'd never killed a man before. But I looked around and felt a little better. The thing hadn't taken any time, and we hadn't made much noise; it was still dark in the hall, and nobody'd ever be the wiser.

Besides, the thing that made me feel good all at once, kind of warm all over, was that for some reason I was certain right then that the man I'd killed, Beldon's murderer, was Sam Howerton. Somehow, he'd got up nerve enough to kill Beldon, thinking he could pin it on me—and I'd caught him red-handed! . . .

First off, I thought the best thing to do was to light out. If Beldon was dead and they found Howerton dead here right by his door, that ought to clear me all right. Then I got to thinking. . . . Those papers were still in the safe. I'd better go into Beldon's place, if I could, and see if there wasn't some way I could get my hands on them. Besides, maybe Beldon wasn't dead yet; maybe Howerton had thought he'd killed him, or hadn't even finished the job because I came and rang the bell. In that case, things would be fixed mighty

pretty for me. I might even bargain with Beldon for the papers, then finish killing him. . . . However it was, it would work out fine for me. . . .

I left the body right where it was. There was no time to find a place to hide it. Besides, if Beldon was dead, in a few minutes I'd want it. I'd drop it inside the door, right near him, and that would clear me. They couldn't hang anything on me then. . . .

I knocked on Beldon's door. There wasn't any answer. He's dead, all right, I thought; but I've got to go in anyway.

Then, for the first time, I noticed that there was a faint crack of light showing through the keyhole. Beldon must have been up when Howerton came. . . . I tried the door.

I was sort of startled when it opened. The front door wasn't always locked—but Beldon didn't usually figure to let anybody that wanted to walk right into his living-room — not without knowing their business.

Anyhow, I walked in. I blinked my eyes. The whole room was bright as day. And I started back.

There, right in the chair by the table where he always sat, was George Beldon —reading a book!

He was sitting there, fully dressed, and he was reading some sort of Greek history book. He was always reading some book like that. And the funny thing was, that he didn't seem a bit scared, nor even surprized, to see me coming in. He just looked up and smiled, with that leering smile of his. It was almost as if he had been expecting me. It gave me the kind of eery feeling, with chills up and down my back, like I had had after the dream. . . .

"Well, well," he said, "if here isn't my good friend Joe Clemens, come to pay me a nocturnal visit! *Very* nocturnal, I should say. It's mighty nice of you, Joe, to come here to keep me company in the wee, lonely hours—and mighty glad I am to see you! And what can I do for you tonight, Joe?"

That's what he said; but glad as he pretended to be, he didn't get up to shake hands with me, or anything like that; he just sat there, smiling. Still, I didn't think there was anything funny about that; he never did get up to shake hands when I came into the room. I always thought he probably had a rod stuck somewhere in that chair, and stayed there ready to use it; but I guess maybe he didn't, after all. He knew he was safe from me, and he didn't need any rod. . . .

I guess I acted kind of nervous. "I—I just come over to talk to you," I said. "About—about nothing particular. . . ."

"Well, well," he came back, with that nasty grin of his, "so my old friend Joe has just come over to talk to me—about nothing in particular. Just come over for a friendly chat. . . . Well, Joe, draw up a chair, then, and we'll chat. . . ."

I DREW up the chair and sat down. There was something about his eyes that made me do it, though I didn't want to sit down. I wanted to get out of there, now, just as quick as I could.

I figured it all out, though, right away. For a minute I'd had a bad start. Maybe it wasn't Howerton out there in the hall. Maybe it was just somebody in the house that thought *I* was jumping *them*. But now I knew, just from Beldon's way of acting, that it must have been Howerton. He had come here, aiming to kill Beldon and blame it on me, and it hadn't worked. Beldon was ready for him, so he had sneaked away. And Beldon had figured the whole thing out, and looked on it as a big joke. He *would* look on it that way; I've never seen anybody that cared so little about his own hide. And in a way, it was kind of a joke between him and me;

he saw that, too, and for once, I thought, he wasn't just laughing *at* me; he was laughing *with* me, too. . . .

Seeing that, I felt a little better. I was pretty sure he wouldn't know I'd killed Howerton; and as long as I could keep him from knowing that, I was sitting okay. As soon as things worked right for it, I'd get out of here and stow away Howerton's body in a safe place, and I'd be in the clear again. Meanwhile, though, I had to watch myself, because I was pretty nervous.

We sat there facing each other for a little bit, and I couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, Beldon smiled a little broader. "Now, Joe," he said, "you're sure you didn't come on *un*friendly business? Or you didn't come, say, on business which has to do with a mutual friend of ours?"

I thought quick that time. I was beginning to get my nerve back, in spite of the creepy way he was grinning at me.

"As far as I know, George," I came back—I'd never called him George before, so you can see I was getting my nerve up—"we've never had any *mutual* friends. I guess we run to different likes."

He chuckled then. He opened his mouth and chuckled out loud, and I could hear him chuckle. "Yes, sir, Joe, that is a fact!" he said. "We have few, if any, mutual friends! As the Greeks would have said . . ."

I didn't get what it was the Greeks would have said, because he said it in Greek—or maybe it was Latin, I don't know. I don't know what it was in what he said that made me feel all nervous and creepy again; but I did, all at once. Maybe it was his acting as if the whole thing was a big joke; because the more he acted that way, the less I thought it was a joke. I had just killed a man, and now I began to think that maybe he was wise to me, after all.

He kept on talking, and I got more and more nervous; and I realized finally that all the time he was trying to make me feel that way. It wasn't a joke between us at all; he was trying to draw me out, make me spill the story so he'd have something more on me—something final, this time. . . .

He couldn't make me spill anything, though—even though he kept smiling, and talking, and asking me questions. But at the same time, I couldn't seem to get away from him. I wanted to, bad enough; but it was like he had me hypnotized.

It was horrible. I began to feel things closing in on me. There was Howerton's body out there in the hall—and it must be pretty near daylight already. There was those papers in the safe. And here I sat listening to Beldon talk, with the whole thing sounding queer and unnatural, and me not able to get away.

"Listen, George," I busted out finally, "those papers you got — I got to have them. George, you can have everything we make on that traction deal if you'll give me those papers."

He looked at me for a minute, and kind of smiled. "Why, Joe," he said, "aren't you being just a little bit rash? Are you *sure*—the entire proceeds of that deal?"

"The whole thing," I told him. "I'm sick of it. I want to clear out."

He leered at me. "Joe," he said, "I'd like to believe you — yes, sir, I would. But how would I know you'd give it all to me? How do I know you wouldn't get rid of me when you had the papers?"

"Listen," I said; "if I ever talked straight I'm doing it now. All I want is to get those papers and get out. I'll sign everything I got over to you and you can finish the traction deal yourself."

He shook his head. He seemed to kind of settle back in his chair. "It's too bad, Joe," he said. "It's really too bad. But you're too late. I can't help you now, Joe."

Something snapped in my head. I started toward him. "Too late!" I snarled. "Damn you, Beldon!"

He knew I was going to kill him, but he didn't move! He sat there, and he was smiling—actually smiling!

It was the most horrible smile I've ever seen. And his eyes—it seemed like they were afire—like hell was alive and burning in them. Looking at them, I began to shake all over. I stopped in my tracks.

He waited a second for me to calm down. "You might as well be going, Joe," he said then. "It won't do you any good to stay here. You might as well get away from the scene of your crime. But if I were you, Joe, *before I go I'd get rid of that bloody blackjack you're carrying in your hand!*"

I GUESS I screamed, then, as I pocketed the thing that I didn't know I was still carrying; but if I did, nobody could have heard me, because Beldon laughed at the same time. It wasn't a chuckle this time; it was that high, horrible laugh of his—only now it was even worse than before. It seemed like he was swallowing blood when he laughed.

I did scream, all right. And I put my hand over my eyes, because I couldn't stand it to look at him any more. He looked hideous. . . .

When I took my hand away, half a second later, I realized that daylight was seeping in through the drawn blinds. It was morning. And when I looked at Beldon's chair, he wasn't there! It was just like he had faded away with the coming of daylight.

For a second I stood there and couldn't move. Then, suddenly, it all came to me. The old devil knew I'd killed Howerton, and he wanted to pin it on me. In that half-second he'd slipped past me—slipped past me and run out the door to call the cops.

I whirled and started after him. He'd closed the door, but I busted it open. I busted out into the hall, and the light streamed after me and onto the body of the man I'd killed an hour or more ago.

I stopped short then. There were funny whimpering noises sounding in my throat. I guess I was white as a ghost.

The body that lay there, staring up at me, was George Beldon's!

After a minute I knelt down. I was trying to tell myself that the first corpse must have come to and killed Beldon when he ran out on me; but it didn't hold. The body was already partly cold. He'd been dead since right after I came into the house. . . .

I guess I went kind of batty then. I couldn't seem to move. I just sat there, making those funny scared noises in my throat again.

That was the way the cops found me when they busted in a minute later.

It seems they'd been hanging around the place all evening, because Beldon had asked them to. They'd missed the killing, but after I went in they peeked in through the blinds and saw me in Beldon's apartment. I tried to tell them that that cleared me, if they'd seen me in there talking. They just laughed.

"Clears you, hell!" one of them said. "Not that, it don't. Not standin' in there for an hour, talkin' to an empty chair!"

I stopped talking, then; and I'm telling you this now because it don't make any difference anyhow, any longer. You don't have to believe me; but I was the one.

these things happened to and I guess I ought to know. You can't make me think that chair was empty; I saw him.

But like I said, it don't make any difference anyhow. They're going to burn me for killing Beldon, and there's no way I can get out of it.

Hell, I killed him, didn't I?

The Seance

By RONAL KAYSER

A strange tale about a spirit-seance held by a fake medium, and the terrible doom that struck from the dark

FEAR. . . .

Ever since it happened, these queer, maggoty thoughts have been crawling inside my skull, and I can't get rid of them. Did you ever stop to wonder what pure Fear — absolute, unadulterated — would be like? A man could quite easily go mad thinking about that.

I've come as close to such Fear as a living person can. And I don't know what it was like. None of us do, or ever will; because those who have experienced the supreme terror can't come back and tell us how it felt. . . . Or can they?

Do the dead ever come back?

God forgive me, but I was egotist enough to fancy that I might find out about that. That night, I thought I had my hands on the very veil of the Unknowable. And instead, I met up with this other thing. Fear, so pure and absolute that it killed! Like a noose around the neck. Like a knife in the heart.

I was told what to expect. But, you see, I thought Swami Singh's warning was just part of his act, like his costume and make-up. He wore a dirty yellow silk turban and had a faded red dressing-robe swathed around his fat, squat body. Artificial dye, or maybe berry juice, stained his round face the color of mahogany. Beads of Mascara sooted his eyelashes. When he spoke, you couldn't help catching the faked, stagy way he whistled the s-sounds.

"There iss sso great a danger," Swami Singh intoned, "when we sstand on the thresshold of Death. . . . And Death is mosst jealouss when we peer into hiss realm! Perhapss Death will claim one of uss—it hass happened sso before, in the sseance."

One of us! Which one did he mean? My eyes jerked to June Darling, the gorgeous girl swathed in a fur cloak; to Henri Patou, a frail and elderly man tapping his cigarette with a nervous, almost transparent, beautifully tended finger; to Larry Stevens, the picture of a solid, successful business man. Or did he mean me, the hard-boiled reporter?

Then I remembered that Singh was putting on an act. Hell, he'd never seen India. His real name would be as or-

dinary as Smith or Brown or Jones. And his act wasn't even a good fraud.

You may wonder why I bothered to go to the seance at all, then. I'll tell you. I sensed that Swami Singh was something more than just a bum actor. Behind the mascaraed lashes, his eyes were blackest carbon. Beneath all this cheap, faked make-up lay a core of reality.

Psychic power. Maybe Singh didn't even know that he had it. Possibly he didn't know how to use it, or maybe was afraid to; but he had it.

There was another angle, too. Suppose Myra Desola could come back from the grave—she had promised to try. . . .

I had a hunch that Myra could do this thing, if anybody could. She'd spent her life doing the things everyone else called impossible.

Can you imagine a woman *without any fingers on her right hand* becoming the most famous dancer of her time? Myra did. And for twenty years, no one ever guessed that her famous shawls were clutched by pitiful, maimed stumps. . . .

We, the very few who did know, never told. Because there is something about deformity—especially deformity in a beautiful woman—that turns the public away. That's why Myra led a life more lonely than Garbo's. The very people who worshipped her would have turned on her with hate, if they'd known.

I can't tell you anything more about Myra Desola, for fear you'd guess her real name. . . .

But I did have this hunch: that she'd be able to use this power of Singh's, even if he couldn't.

"MOSST horrible and awful peril for all of uss," Singh hissed. "Death, perhapss. . . ."

We had tied him into the grandfather's chair behind the table in the seance room. We knotted his wrists to its wooden arms with our handkerchiefs, and bound his ankles to the chair-legs with our neckties. We had wrapped leather straps around the bottom rungs of the chair and had nailed the straps onto the floor.

On top of that, I was to sit in a chair behind his, and hold his arms throughout the seance.

And on the other side of the table, Patou and Stevens and June Darling sat in ordinary kitchen chairs.

"There iss a key on the table," Singh whispered to me, "and the sswitch iss on the wall behind uss. Turn out the light."

I picked up the key and walked to the back of the room. It isn't necessary to go into details about this room, except to say that we had made sure there was but one possible entrance—the door, and we had pasted brown paper over that.

This wasn't an ordinary switch, though. One had to have the key to turn the lights on or off.

"Hell!" I blurted.

I don't know why I shivered, then. I had turned the switch, and the chandelier blinked out, leaving us in darkness. Any kid would have expected that. . . . But they ought to invent a special name for this kind of utter, absolute dark. It was as if my eyeballs had been painted with ink—ink the color of fresh lampblack, drear, caliginous, soot-black.

It wasn't until I had fumbled my way through that solid murk, not until I was crouched in the chair behind Swami Singh and had my hands on his arms, that I realized. I, with the key, alone could switch up the light again. And the swami alone knew where I was—by the grip of my hands on him. Now I knew why he had insisted on our bringing no matches into this room!

I knew then that he was a fake.

And I knew that he wasn't.

How could that be? Surely a man can't have two absolutely contradictory

emotions *at the same time.* You can't believe a thing, and not believe it, with the same thought.

But I did, as if there were *two* brains, entirely separate, inside my skull, each grinding out entirely different ideas—like two radios, tuned in on different stations, playing in one room.

"Bunk!" one brain sneered.

"God, this is real!" the other brain whispered.

Five minutes passed; ten.

Every few moments, Swami Singh jerked. And after each jerk he got more rigid. I suddenly dug my fingers into his biceps, hard, and felt the muscle flinch. So this trance of his was a fake.

And underneath was something else. Power. It beat through the silk sleeves of his robe in hot, weird waves. Not like the prickle of a concealed electric battery. These emanations of his were psychic, occult. That some people do have such "influence" is a scientifically provable fact. Many of the early saints had it, so powerfully that it fairly shone through their flesh.

Every few moments he fetched a long, stagy groan, like a ham Romeo dying with one eye cocked open to see how the audience was taking it.

Rasputin had power like this, I remembered. In his case, it was evil. I didn't think it could be either good or evil in Swami Singh . . . because he couldn't harness it. The "influence" simply blew through him like wind through a tree. Or it was like juice in a high-voltage wire. He couldn't any more switch it on or off than the wire can.

"It'ss coming!" he suddenly yelled. And I knew that he lied; there was nothing.

But there was something.

Now a whitish speck swam into sight. It had a very dim and faint phosphorescence—an earthly phosphorescence, I felt sure. It hovered some eight or nine inches above the floor, possibly three feet to the left of us.

The thing which I felt had nothing to do with this whitish speck.

I would say that this luminous speck had about the size of a walnut when I first noticed it. It very quickly swelled to the largeness of a baseball; though it didn't resemble a baseball, being very wrinkled.

"The firsst materialization iss very difficult for the sspirit," Swami Singh hissed. "A full figure at the firsst, iss sso rare. . . ."

THE wrinkled shape smoothed out as it elongated into form. It became a woman's face; dim and blurred and scarcely visible, it might have been taken for almost any woman, of any age. But it wasn't Myra Desola.

All the same, Myra had come into this room. I felt her watching us. I couldn't be mistaken.

"Who are you, sspirit?" the swami hissed.

"It is I," came a soprano reply. "It is Myra."

Bunk! Her voice had been contralto. I knew what was going on here. The swami changed his voice and threw it down toward the face—ventriloquism.

"Do you recognize anyone here?" Singh asked.

"Yes," the soprano hesitated. "There is June. And it's Glen, isn't it?"

Glen meant me; and that was more bunk. Myra Desola would have spoken to Patou first. Lord, she'd been his mistress for twenty years. She would have greeted June next, because she'd raised the girl from a street waif to womanhood; and then, Larry Stevens, for he'd managed her tours.

But our precious swami didn't know all that. All he had to go on was our

names, and the fact that we wanted to talk to a certain "Myra".

He played it smartly, though. "Would any of you folks like to ask her some questionss about the Great Beyond?" he inquired.

Yeah. He would like to answer questions about that. Something we couldn't check up on.

June Darling's voice floated through the intense dark. "Myra, will you tell me the brand of perfume you always used? I've forgotten, and I wanted to buy some."

Perfume. Myra's perfume. God, it was in this room. That trail of strange, glamorous scent. . . .

Singh was trying to wriggle out of it. He had the soprano voice saying, "I do not remember—it seems so long ago——"

That heady draft of perfume in the darkness! It didn't come from the face. It had nothing to do with the face.

By this time, I had pretty well deduced where that face came from. He couldn't be using his hands, for I had a grasp on the arms. It didn't come from his garments, for Stevens and I had searched through those. It had to be the chair. The rungs of the chair. He could press against them with his legs.

Instantly I saw what the layout must be. One of the rungs at the front of the chair would be hollowed out. There would be a piston inside the rung, and a spring to shoot it out. This rung could not be made to fit into the chair-leg on the left side, but only appeared to do so. The pressure of Singh's legs would release it, move it back an inch or so, and finally allow the piston to slide forth.

This accounted for the position of the face, its distance above the floor, and its distance from the chair.

But what accounted for the perfume, and the feeling that Myra had come into the room?

The logical part of me refused to believe in the perfume. I concentrated on the fake face. There would be a hollow chamber in the end of the piston. A rubber bag, painted to resemble a face—painted with luminous paint—would be firmly cemented there. And a concealed air chamber would supply the pressure to force this mask out at the piston's end. . . .

Abruptly, I snatched my hands away from Singh's arms, and I dived. Damn! There wasn't any face. I sprawled on the floor.

The swami had been too fast for me. Obviously, mask and piston shot back into place the instant he released the pressure of his legs against the rung. But wait! I'd switch on the lights and tear that chair to pieces with my bare hands. . . .

A soft, woman's laugh bubbled through the dark. A contralto laugh! A contralto voice said: "But I haven't forgotten, June. The perfume was called 'Spring Breeze', and it was put up for me specially by Lodi, in Paris."

And this was the real thing. I knew that even before I twisted over on the floor and saw her. (There was only one mind, then, from the moment I looked on her. I had no doubt at all.)

"Myra!" came Larry Stevens' sob. "God, it is Myra!"

There was a sound of feet stumbling on the floor, and somehow I knew that would be Patou groping toward her.

Of them all, I was closest to her, so close that I could almost have dipped my fingers in the luminous, azure haze that clothed her.

It was as if a radium thread limned her nude limbs and magnificent breasts. About her face the glow thickened to a positive halo. The wide lips smiled.

Curiously, this ardent blue aura made no impression whatever upon the pro-

found darkness. It shed no pool of radiance upon the polished floor, nor could I see the table—or the chair, where Swami Singh sat and fetched great, racking breaths. The illumination seemed to turn *inward*, so that it gleamed upon the marble-white of her flesh and the vivid scarlet of shawl wrapped around her hips and caught loosely over the right forearm.

And this, I sensed, was the way she would have chosen to come back. In costume. Ready for the show to go on. . . .

"Myra," Henri Patou whispered. "Will you give me your hand?"

I COULD not see him at all. But her arm rose in its luminous flowing line, and then her hand vanished—was blotted out—as he fondled it.

There was no sound now but the harsh, hurried breathing of Swami Singh in his chair.

Then Patou laughed; or perhaps he wept.

"It *is* Myra," he said. "Come, Larry—and you, Glen, and June—*take her hand*. . . ."

I got up from the floor. I went to her, and I took her hand. Dread rushed through me; I trembled; my knees weakened. You see, I had somehow expected or thought that her flesh would be *warm*.

And it wasn't. No—cold, and limp; but I touched it, and there couldn't be any mistake. My hand groped over the piteous stumps where her fingers had been hacked off—close to the palm, with less than an inch of each remaining.

"Do not cry, my poor Henri," she said tenderly. For he wept, now—the terrible tears of a man who cries without shame. "It does not matter any more," she said. "The sickness and the pain, the loneliness, not even Death. . . . All that is behind me. It is gone, quite gone."

This was nothing for me to hear. Nor Larry, nor June. But we could not do otherwise. We knew somehow that to have opened the door and let the faintest ray of light into this room would have shattered the spell. . . .

"It is gone," she said. "Like those poor fingers of mine for which you once wept such bitter tears."

Behind us, in the tenebrous lamp-soot black, Singh cried out in a broken voice of terror: "The light! In God's name, turn on the light!"

I groped toward his chair, and slapped—twice—with my open palm against his bleating mouth. "Shut up!" I said. "Leave them alone—those two."

The feel of his flesh against my hand was snaky, lizard-like. I hated him for this power that he had, and we could not ever have—the power to call *her* back from Death.

And I hated him, that he should hear these words. "I loved you, Myra," cried Patou. "And you would never marry me. You never told me—why——"

So I knew why he wept. It was for his memory of her, and the single flaw that made the memory less than perfect.

"I will tell you now." The contralto voice throbbed. "There need not be any secrets between us, any more. My poor Henri, but did you never guess?"

Patou whispered, "That there was someone else? I guessed *that*. There was a time when I suspected Larry. . . . And afterward, I thought perhaps, the stage—your art——"

"None that I loved but you," said Myra. "Not since that day in the old Greatnoble Theater—the day when you took me into your arms. . . . Do you remember, Henri? You kissed my hands—my beautiful hands, you called them. Can you remember the words you said then? You talked of hands. You said you could not love a woman whose knuckles were red and ugly. . . . You spoke of the slender, trailing fingers of

Eleanore Duse, and you said that mine were yet more beautiful. There was a song — *'Pale hands I loved'* — and you called it *my* song. . . .

"You thought we were alone in the theater, Henri. But there was one other —hidden backstage—my husband——"

THE silence! The blackness of the room!

"Husband!" cried Patou. "I never knew. . . ."

Through the haze of blue the wide lips smiled sadly. "No, I never told you. I was young when I married Hugo Singer —young, and stage-struck, and not knowing what marriage meant. He fascinated me in some strange way. . . . But I had learned to hate him—as he must have hated me.

"For, that night, he forced his way into my dressing-room. *You* were on the stage at the time. There was a New York theatrical agent in the audience; and it meant much to you—a successful performance, that night."

Her low, sad contralto laugh!

"I did not spoil it for you, Henri. I did not cry out. Not even when I saw the knife—the butcher knife—in his hand! Not even when he seized me. He was drunk—intoxicated with his rage. 'Pale hands that he loves!' he said, between his teeth. 'I will fix your pretty hands!'

"There stood a great, metal-bound trunk in the corner of the room. I fought, and he was too strong for me. He placed my hand on the edge of the trunk, and he struck——"

She sobbed. All the horror of a woman's mutilated beauty and wasted years curdled in that sound. Hearing it, I felt my skin knit up into points of exquisite dread. God, how she must have hated that monster of a husband—with a hate that not even the grave had been able to quench.

"I would have killed him, if I had known!" Patou said. Abysmal rage stirred in his voice.

"Yes, you would have ruined your career — and mine," said Myra. "I couldn't tell you, then. But now it is different. . . . I have no career, now, and they can't lock up a dead woman."

Something flashed in her hand. Something that she had snatched from the folds of her shawl—*a knife*. A huge, ugly butchering-knife. . . .

She moved swiftly, and her luminous limbs swam as a bird in flight, the knife shining as she raised it before her terrible, glowing eyes.

A scream! A most horrible, ghastly, and unhuman scream!

I shuddered as I lurched toward the back wall. In the darkness I could not find the switch. The rough, unpapered plaster rasped my fingers as I sought for it.

There was a sound of wild, contralto laughter. Frantically, I pawed the wall as another shriek rang out. It reverberated, as the last cry that goes up when a great ship with all on board is swallowed into the sea. It gibbered, like the wild wail of an alpinist hurtling down a thousand-foot cliff. So First Man must have cried out when the claws of the saber-tooth tiger ripped his flesh. There was agony in it, and terror, and despair.

Often now in the night I live over that unendurable instant before I found the switch, and my numbed finger forced the key into it, and the light in the chandelier flashed up.

I turned, then, and stared. There was the solid, small room and the door we had pasted shut with brown paper. . . .

And the lingering fragrance of an exotic perfume. . . .

And the four of us—Patou, Larry Stevens, June Darling, and I—peering at the man trussed in the chair.

The swami was dead. We knew that. His eyes, wide-staring and bulging like fat prunes in their sockets, were sightless; the fat face had the grayness of death under the mahogany dye; and his mouth hung open and slack.

Blood dripped from his manacled hands. . . . And for a crazed moment I thought that his fingers had been hacked off. Actually, the blood came from the palms, lacerated by the nails of those fingers which were so tightly curled up that the mortician had to scissor through the tendons to open the hands.

I SAW the name which was written on the death certificate; and it was not Singh, but Singer. On the next line below, for cause of death, they wrote *heart failure*.

I know better.

It was Fear. . . .

The Rajah's Gift *

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

STRANGE tales are told of the rajah of Lacra-Kai, of the justice he dealt, of the rewards he gave; but the strangest of all these many tales is that of the gift he gave to Zaid, the Persian who had served him long and well. A crafty man was the rajah, an eastern Machiavelli who by his devices had retained the sovereignty of his petty state almost unimpaired by British rule; a keen, shrewd diplomat, a polished cosmopolitan, an Oriental wearing a thick veneer of European culture. In short, he was an enlightened monarch, a tributary prince who was left quite to his own devices as regarded the internal administration of his state. But it is of his gift to Zaid whereof we are to deal.

In the privacy of his palace, screened from the view of his people, the rajah was quite European, dispensing with the pomp and glitter and formality that is supposed to surround all Eastern potentates at all times. Therefore it was that Zaid the Persian, who had served his master long and well, not only sat, but also smoked in the royal presence.

"Zaid," the prince was saying, "but for your courage and fidelity I would

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1925.

surely have been assassinated; therefore have I summoned you this afternoon so that you may receive some token of my gratitude. Name whatsoever you desire and it shall be yours, for I mean to reward you richly."

"My lord," replied Zaid, "there is but one request that I would make, and that is mad beyond all conception of madness."

"Nevertheless, let me hear it; tell me what is on your mind. Forget that I am rajah of Lacra-Kai, and consider me but as your friend who is indebted to you; therefore speak freely."

"For ten years I have been favored by your munificence," began Zaid, speaking slowly. "For ten years I have been the friend of kings; but all that is nothing."

Zaid paused. A far-away look had crept over his features; he seemed to be gazing through and beyond the rajah, and back to some dimly remembered, almost forgotten episode of the past. And then, picking his words as one groping in the dark picks his steps, he told how, twenty years before, he had stood on the edge of the crowd in the square before the great temple of Kali, awaiting the arrival of the procession at whose head the present rajah would be riding. Zaid, a boy scarcely a dozen years old, ragged, dirty, half starved, part of the scum of an Eastern city, stood that day to watch the rajah ride past in state. All the color and magnificence, all the barbaric pomp of that Oriental court was there, dazzling, the concentrated, fiery splendor that marked a prince's accession to his throne. And all this the boy saw, yet saw not, for he had eyes for none but the rajah. High above the crowd, on the back of a great elephant he sat, dark, calm, impassive, and arrogant as a god. The prince was oblivious of the pomp and splendor, oblivious of the tumult and applause; on that day it seemed to Zaid that he was not a man, but destiny itself in march. And as the rajah drew near, the great temple gong clanged with a reverberation that seemed to shake the very base of the universe; a strange, unearthly vibration that mingled with the resonance of brass the hiss of serpents and the rustle of silk; a sound that rose and fell, resonant, sonorous, awful. Through all this the rajah sat calm and inscrutable, above all exultation, above all human emotion. But at the sound of that gong, at the sight of that hard, impassive face, a great madness possessed Zaid, so that his blood became as a stream of flame. And he swore that he, too, would some day ride in such a procession, would bear himself with that same god-like hauteur, that same superb arrogance; he, Zaid, hungry beggar lad and scum of the streets, dared have such a vision.

Silent were the gongs; vanished the procession; and the new rajah ruled in Lacra-Kai. But with Zaid the vision remained, following him over half the earth, and returning with him to Lacra-Kai, where, ten years later, he entered the service of that same rajah, and, by strange turns of fortune, rose to rank and power in that same court; for in the East all things are possible. Who has not heard of the blacksmith who founded the Sassanian dynasty that once ruled Persia?

Such was the tale Zaid told the rajah.

"As strange a tale as I have ever heard," mused the prince. "You have indeed prospered." Then, suddenly, "And all this is apropos of what?"

Zaid started, as one waking from a dream, then laughed oddly.

"Hear my desire, then deal with me as you will. For twenty years that vision has haunted me. Much has happened since then; much have I seen and experienced, but through it all, this mad desire has per-

(Please turn to page 502)

COMING NEXT MONTH

I DASHED to the door and out, slammed it shut behind me, leaned against it, panting, and looked about me, ashamed lest someone see how badly frightened I was. Someone did see: a woman, through the crack in an adjoining door that stood ajar. I spotted the door, flung myself toward it as it started shut, struck it savagely, sprawled on the floor of a strange room.

"May I ask the meaning of this intrusion?" said a cold voice.

I stared at the woman, and my heart turned a somersault. There was no mistaking her. She was the woman of the black sash. But in her eyes there was no slightest sign of recognition, not even a flicker.

Cold, distant, aloof. Obviously she considered me an intruder. But one thing she couldn't hide, one thing that made us kin in spite of anything that could have happened: abysmal fear, deep down in her black eyes.

I clutched her shoulders.

"Tell me about it! Tell me, do you hear? *What about the dogs in that room?*"

The coldness left her, the fear took possession, ghastly, horrible fear. She would have fallen if I hadn't clutched her, lowered her into a chair.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned. *"The little things are back! The little things are back!"* . . .

This story is warranted to send icy fingers of horripilation up your back, as the ghastly horror unfolds itself. Don't read it late at night, unless your nerves are made of steel; for it may induce nightmares, or keep you from sleep. But those of you who love to revel in a powerful, horrifying and utterly fascinating weird story will find this vivid novelette exactly to your taste. It will be published complete in the May WEIRD TALES:

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The Rajah's Gift

(Continued from page 500)

sisted. And at last it happened that I entered your service, and that, having served you well, it has pleased you to grant me whatsoever I might desire. Therefore, seeing that this great madness has haunted me all these years, I make this request: that I be permitted to ride in state as I saw you ride twenty years ago, so that I may fulfill the oath I then swore."

Whereat the rajah replied in the tone of one who denies some child a dangerous toy: "Fool! To grant you that favor would be to sign your death-warrant. Were you to ride thus at noon, poison or dagger would find you before dawn; for no man may enjoy such a mark of favor and live. What? Have you lived in this land all these years and do not realize the penalty you would pay? Consider a moment: my son is dead; the succession to the throne lay among my three nephews. One of them sought to hasten his succession. The plot was discovered, and the plotter I punished by showing him a mark of extraordinary favor. Immediately it was rumored about that I had selected him as my heir; and within ten days he died, but not by my command, for that was superfluous. The princes of the blood, and the lords of the court . . ."

The rajah made a suggestive, sweeping gesture with his hand, then continued, "Me you were able to save from assassination; yourself you could not save, nor could I save you. You would ride in state; rumors would drift about. And you know the rest."

"Even so, my lord; I know the rest. But I will take my chance. It is not good for a man to cherish a vision, however mad, without having made some effort to attain it."

"Think again, Zaid, think again! Cast aside your insanity. Choose whatsoever else you will . . . a lakh of rupees . . . ten lakhs if you will . . . jewels the like of which you have never dreamed . . . and I have a dancing-girl whose equal is not to be found in the entire world . . . all this, and more, is yours, for you have served me well; it is to you that I owe my life. Be reasonable, friend."

"Be reasonable? That is the one command I cannot obey, for in me there is no reason. This mad vision has haunted me entirely too long. So though it may cost me my life, as surely it may, let me see it to a finish. For there at least would be a roundness, a completeness to my career that in no way else could I attain. In the square before the great temple of Kali I found the inspiration that led me to enter your service, to attain your favor, to serve you well; and in that same square, if need be, I will meet my doom. The cycle will be complete. After that, let come what may, for I shall have cheated destiny of the rare gift of satisfaction, the gift so often denied to kings. And after all, is the assassin so sure of finding me? Is that conclusion inevitable?"

The rajah smiled as one upon whom great understanding has suddenly descended.

"Zaid," he said, "you are more than ever a man after my own heart. Mad you are, stark mad and raving; I understand, for I, too, have been haunted by visions. But none has understood my thoughts, even as none would understand your mad desire. It would be misconstrued, and . . . you know the result."

SUDDENLY the rajah arose.

"Come, Zaid, let me tempt you with the things I have but named."

And Zaid was led through subterranean vaults, treasure vaults full of gilded

arms and armor, trays of flaming jewels, great chests of age-old coins, dinars and mohurs of gold, the secreted plunder of a hundred generations.

"All this leaves you unmoved? Then let me try again."

The Persian accompanied his master to the very heart of the palace, to a hall overshadowed with twilight—a broad, spacious hall whose walls were curiously carved with strange figures in unnamably odd postures, engaged in unmentionable diversions. And then his ears were caressed by the soft, sensuously wailing notes of reed and stringed instruments: his senses were stirred by the dull pulsing of atabals, throbbing like a heart racked with passion. And through the purple gloom of incense fumes he saw the lithe, swaying bodies of dancing girls, slim and beautiful. One, emerging from the figures of the dance, slowly advanced and made obeisance before the rajah.

"And this is Nilofal, the matchless bayadere, she whose equal is not to be found in the entire world. Should she please you . . ."

The Persian, lost in admiration, saw that she was perfection incarnate, outstripping the maddest flight of the most voluptuous fancy. But when he turned to reply, the rajah had disappeared; and the door through which they had entered was barred.

What allurements, what sorceries, what fascinations Nilofal used to entice the fancy of Zaid during those three days, we shall never know. Suffice it to say that she failed in her efforts to separate the Persian from his madness.

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Once again Zaid stood before the rajah, who smiled with the air of one whose cleverness has just reaped its reward in the solution of a difficult problem.

"What now, Zaid? Was Nilofal to your taste? Surely she must have been; and certainly she is worth all the dreams that have haunted men since the beginning of time."

"My lord," replied the Persian, "you have tempted me as man was never before tempted; yet am I to sacrifice the vision of twenty years in favor of a treasure vault and a lupanar? Although you may refuse it, I nevertheless hold fast to my first desire."

"So be it then; and tomorrow at noon you shall see it satisfied."

And then and there were preparations made for Zaid to ride in royal state through the streets of Lacra-Kai.

NOON the next day. The rajah, watching from the roof of his palace, saw Zaid in the gilded howdah, mounted on the great elephant that carried none but princes of the blood. Calm and serene and god-like sat the Persian: a king he seemed, and the descendant of a hundred kings, for at that moment he was about to fulfill his destiny. Once again a great understanding descended upon the rajah.

"It was wrong indeed that I tried to dissuade him," reflected the rajah, "for whatever the end may be, it will be as nothing; Zaid is about to accomplish that which he set out to do when he was a beggar, a hungry, nameless urchin. There is something great and heroic in this madness . . . but what will happen when he passes the temple of Kali? Can he ever become a man again? . . . for in his madness he is more than a man; he has overturned destiny to fulfill a childish fancy. . . ."

And the prince, watching the procession get under way, was lost in admiration of the man who for half an hour would be rajah.

"And having attained his dream, will not the man Zaid have died, though he live a hundred years thereafter in security? And what would life mean to him?"

The procession, turning, had taken Zaid from the rajah's view. Bestirring himself from his revery, he whispered a few words to Al Tarik, his trusted servant.

". . . And do not fail me in the slightest detail."

The rajah repeated his instructions. Al Tarik departed. And in the meanwhile, Zaid rode to the fulfilment of his dream.

Through the streets of Lacra-Kai the procession wound. The Persian, as in a dream, bore himself not as a man but as the avatar of some god returning to judge the world. Vanity? A love of pomp? No; surely not that. Rather was it that strange madness that overwhelms men when they snatch from fate the achievement of a vision. On and on he rode, like the slow, sure march of destiny, immutable, irresistible. And but one thought flitted through his brain, the words of some long-forgotten sage: "When indeed they do grant to a man the realization of his dream, they straightway reach forth to snatch from him his prize, lest in his triumph he become god-like and gayly toss them from their lofty thrones." His lips curled in the shadow of a smile, for swift indeed would have to be their envy to defeat him; the great temple of Kali was at hand. He was approaching the square where, twenty years ago, an obscure nobody, a starving beggar, a mere boy, he had seen the vision that now was materializing. And then the great gong in the temple rang, reverberating like the crash of doom, filling the entire universe with its shivering resonance—full-throated, colossal, thou

hissing with the rustle of silk—a sound that swelled, and died, and rose again.

As slowly as some animated Juggernaut the royal elephant advanced, pace by pace, deliberately, majestically, as though each step took him from world to world. And again the gong, touched to life by the mallet wielded by a temple slave, rolled forth its sonorous, vibrant crash.

A few more steps, and Zaid, the Persian, whom the rajah loved to honor, was before the temple of Kali. High and arrogant was he, as Rama going forth to conquer the world; no longer a man, but transfigured beyond recognition. Again the temple gong gave forth its vibrant note, reverberant, awful; diminishing, then rising and swelling again. And the god, who but half an hour before had been Zaid, the Persian, toppled forward in the gilded howdah. The last roll of the gong had masked the smacking report of a high-powered rifle.

THAT evening the rajah gazed at the body of the man who had served him well, the man he had esteemed and loved as a friend. Pity and sorrow were on his lean, hard features; but regret was absent.

"A king and more than a king," he soliloquized, as he regarded the still, transfigured face of the Persian. "A madman, perhaps—or the avatar of a god, for by his own efforts he rounded his destiny. The cycle is complete, from the temple of Kali, and back again; the circle has closed upon itself. Yes, it is well that I commanded Al Tarik to fire before Zaid endured the agony of becoming mortal again. . . ."

Such was the gift of the rajah of Lacra-Kai. Yet once, at least, though he did not know it, the rajah had made a futile move: the shot of Al Tarik had missed, and there was no wound on the Persian's body.

BRAIN MAGIC

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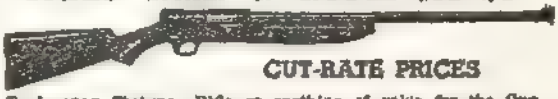

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THERE have been several inquiries, in letters to the Eyrie, as to what medium our artists work in; especially as to Margaret Brundage's covers. Mrs. Brundage draws her famous nudes and near-nudes with pastel crayons. This method makes it possible to obtain more delicacy than water-colors or oils, but the pastel drawings are so fragile that we are afraid to sneeze in the same room with them, for fear that the pictures will disappear in a puff of dust. We are always glad when the color plates of Mrs. Brundage's exquisite drawings come from the engraver's hands; for then we know that no harm has befallen the pictures. James Napoli's illustrations are made with pen and ink (*The Hour of the Dragon,* etc.). Andrew Brosnatch also works with pen and ink (art heading for the Eyrie). Hugh Rankin's medium is grease-pencil, which requires a special kind of paper to draw on (*The Ruler of Fate,* and art heading for the Weird Story Reprint). Virgil Finlay has developed a technique of his own, using both white and black inks, and combining line drawing with stipple to obtain his unique effects (*The Face in the Wind, The Druidic Doom,* etc.). This is the same technique that he used in the twenty-five exquisite drawings that illustrate the Wright's Shakespeare Library edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* which is the first of a series of Shakespeare plays in the form of beautifully illustrated magazines.

Satan Improves with Age

Sidney Slomich, of Dorchester, Massachusetts, writes: "The January issue shows a great improvement over the November number. The only lemon was the cover. The best stories in order of their merit are *The Satin Mask, Horror Insured,* and *The Dark Land.* At first I didn't care for the Doctor Satan series, but now I am really enthusiastic about them. I first read *The Man Who Chained the Lightning* and *The Consuming Flame* and thought them terrible. But *Hollywood Horror* and *Horror Insured* were swell."

Revive King Kull

Mrs. John A. Heller, of Long Beach, California, writes: "Robert E. Howard's stories are always fascinating from start to finish and I know this new serial will never be a disappointment. I notice in the Eyrie someone asks to have Howard's stories about King Kull revived. Come to think of it, I think the King was a more fascinating character than Conan. I remember I was bitterly disappointed when he dropped the King for Conan. However, Conan has won his spurs with me, and I do not want him to be dropped entirely in favor of further stories about King Kull. I would like him to give us stories of each in sort of a rotating schedule. Still the King will have to go places to win back the place he used to have and lost to Conan; yet he only lost it because Howard dropped him entirely."

Left to the Imagination

Paul S. Smith, of Orange, New Jersey, writes: "Congratulations on *A Visitor from Far Away,* by Loretta G. Burrough. It is one of the most successful weird tales I have ever read. The atmosphere of high-pitched terror is admirably created and sustained throughout by the author; and the grim and terrible climax is finely in keeping with the rest of this skilfully written story. *Coils of the Silver Serpent* is certainly an exciting yarn and a good one, though scarcely weird. It is what I would call a borderline story—that is, one that makes us wonder whether the proper place for it is in WEIRD TALES or in a detective story magazine. However, Mr. Editor, I am inclined to think that your decision to ac-

cept and publish this story was a wise one. A few words regarding *The Temple*, by Lovecraft, which was your reprint for February: Lovecraft is an outstanding literary artist, but it really seems to me that he might have carried this story a little further. I, for one, would like to have at least an inkling of what happened to Karl Heinrich when he entered the temple. Of course, we can let our imagination build up an ending based on whatever hints the story supplies. This, however, seems hardly satisfactory to me, though I can easily understand that Lovecraft's belief may have been that the final episode would be stronger if left to the reader's imagination than if actually related by the author."

Man Alive!

Eugene Benefiel, of Los Angeles, writes: "Just another line adding to the rapidly swelling chorus to keep prosaic detectives out of WEIRD TALES. Even Doctor Satan and his arch-nemesis Keane can be deleted with no anesthetic needed. By all means continue to use those little fillers; both poetry and short short-stories are excellent, and no mistake. The covers are okay, as are the interior illustrations, and the authors for the most part are fine. Over a long period my choices for the best writers would be C. L. Moore, C. A. Smith, Robert E. Howard, and Seabury Quinn. Let's have more tales of reincarnation, ancient magic, voodoo, vampires, and anything but those lousy detective stories that one can get in any of several bad imitations of WT that are on the market. Your February number contains some very good tales, and one very bad one. *Yvala* by C. L. Moore rates alongside of *Shambleau* in its simple though very striking description and narrative. Moore consistently gives us top-notch tales, and I for one vote him a rousing cheer for his efforts. *Norn* takes the rest of the field for a ride, and Nelson's posthumous poem, *Jorgas*, rates third. The only story I definitely did not like was *Coils of the Silver Serpent*. Even that would not have grated on my nerves so badly if only the hero had picked up some expression to punctuate his 'Man Alive!' with. I never got so sick of one word in my life as I did of the word 'man' in that story. Thanks for listening."

Old-Time Weird Stories

Edward B. Smith, of Hillsdale, Michigan, writes: "Since in the Eyrie you request readers' opinions, I might as well take this oppor-

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tunity to cast one vote against detective stories; and in favor of more of your real old-time *weird* stories, with perhaps an occasional top-notch interplanetary yarn of really stirring pseudo-science (often, and quite improperly, dubbed scientific fiction). On the whole, however, I want to compliment you on the job of editing you are doing. The fact that my name has remained so long upon your subscription list shows that I am a satisfied customer: but more than that, I want to say that WEIRD TALES fills a niche in my reading that nothing else will satisfy, and I hope to continue enjoying it for many more years."

About Our Covers

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "As usual, I found the February WEIRD TALES very interesting. Your best stories were *The Temple* by Lovecraft, *Yvala* by Moore, *Wife of the Dragon-fly* by Ernst and *The Hour of the Dragon* by Howard. *Coils of the Silver Serpent* would have been O. K. in one of the many detective or adventure story magazines, but it certainly had no place in WEIRD TALES. *Norn* was a most unusual story with a startling climax, but I believe it could have been made much more effective if the author had condensed it somewhat. Congratulations, Henry Kuttner, on your *Ballad of the Gods*. A darn good poem in any man's language. It seems to me that your covers have been poorer of late. They seem to lack something of the artistry which they previously possessed. Your best recent cover illustrated *The Avenger from Atlantis* in last July's issue. Your best cover of all time was by St. John, illustrating *Golden Blood*. Brundage is good, but I have never seen anyone capable of depicting the fantastic and imaginative as perfectly as St. John. He is in a class by himself. Am glad to see that WEIRD TALES continues on as a monthly, when other science-fiction magazines are going onto a bi-monthly policy. Perhaps, in time, WEIRD TALES will eliminate all opposition and stand alone once more in the fantastic field. I, for one, hope so."

Ooooh!

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "Uh-guh—ooh! I don't lak snekks—speshly big ones, but I read *Coils of the Silver Serpent* anyhow. And was it great—or was it? The narsty zoölogist was so perfect—even to being pot-bellied. I'm kinda disappointed in Mrs. Brundage's cover conception of the story. The faces of the men don't look so very natchrel-like and the girl's eyes aren't just so. Her (the artist's) women are usually such perfect ideals—in my conception. *Yvala* was so surprizing—I hadn't expected anything quite like it. She was something of a mirage—it's there and it isn't—now you see it now you don't—presto—change—it's magic! Such surprizes are welcome, C. L. Moore. Mean ole husband—serves him right for being slapped down as a spider in *Wife of the Dragon-fly*. I don't like bugs. Conan is getting better 'n better. I always save that for the last, as I always save the best for the last, so that it can be thoroughly enjoyed. *Norn* is a werewolf tale I guess—and as such—my eyes were thaaaat big! The introduction of the cousin as a small yellow fox is a new one on me. *The Temple*, your reprint story, was a perfect portrayal of an arrogant Prussian. I know only too well their bold swaggering cruelty—my father is a Prussian and there are many relatives—equally stubborn and bull-headed. My compliments to Mr. Lovecraft. The story itself was good, satisfying my morbid curiosity for undersea revelations and lost Atlantis. That's all this time."

What a Cover!

William Blackfort, of Hawaii, writes: "Have just received my copy of WT for January, and what a cover, what a cover! The Brundage covers are swell. I am collecting them for my scrap-book. I now have ten of them. Have been reading WT since 1924. I left off for a while but found I was lost without my copy of good old WT. My favorite authors are Clark Ashton Smith, Seabury Quinn and Robert E. Howard. I do not care for the Doctor Satan stories at all; they are not weird. Give me some stories of lycanthropy and vampires, something with real horror and chills. One of the best stories in WT recently was *In a Graveyard* by E. Binder, and *The Way Home* by Stern. Please don't ruin WT by having space-ships or anything else on WT covers but the Brundage nudes or semi-nudes."

Scarcer than Hens' Teeth

Grant Vail Wallace, of Berkeley, California, writes: "I haven't missed an issue of WT since 1930, and hope I never have to. As you know, back issues other than those

you offer for sale are scarcer than hens' teeth. . . . Here's a nice big bunch of sure-enough, non-carnivorous terrestrial orchids to C. L. Moore for *Yvala* and all the other lovely bits of imagery from his prolific brain. . . . Am not so sure about featuring *Coils of the Silver Serpent*. It seems that a pot-bellied zoölogist with high heels was lugging an anaconda around in a trunk, and siccing him onto various poor, innocent people for no reason at all, by aid of some imaginary ophidian catnip (or snake-nip!). He was run to earth, somehow or other, by a dumb egg of an Irish cop with Semitic features and a vocabulary of two words: 'Man, oh man!' If Mr. Parkhill ever sees this, he'll probably challenge me to a duel."

Northwest Smith, Conan, de Grandin

Edgar Hurd writes from CCC headquarters at Sacramento, California: "I have just finished the February issue and I wish to salute you for the good work. I have long cherished WEIRD TALES as the best fiction magazine on the market and each issue seems to bear out my belief. I much enjoyed the third installment of *The Hour of the Dragon* by Robert E. Howard; Conan is one of my favorite characters. May we have adventures of Conan until doomsday, I'll never get tired of him. The reprint by Lovecraft, *The Temple*, was a masterpiece. It goes along so mildly but with strange under-currents you do not quite see; then all of a sudden it ends and it almost knocks one over. Why don't we have more of Lovecraft? I bow down and bump my forehead on the floor to C. L. Moore. I must say that Moore's character, Northwest Smith, is superb. *Yvala* was a story that will remain in my mind long. I grant it first place in the issue, it was *great*. I again put in my appeal for fantastic and strange stories, like *The Cold Gray God* and *Yvala* by Moore, *The Six Sleepers* by Hamilton, and *Vulthoom* by C. A. Smith. I do not like stories of vampires, werewolves and other stories on that order. . . . I enjoyed *Satan in Exile* by Bernal; give us more like it, but keep them weird or fantastic. I also enjoy the Doctor Satan series, but don't let Paul Ernst get into a rut. They have been weird and different so far; may they stay that way! Don't let any readers try to knock the Conan stories on the count that they are not weird. In their scene of action and events they are sheerest fantasy, and the humanness

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of Conan makes them so much the better. I also enjoy the Jules de Grandin adventures. Hurrah for the little Frenchman!"

A New Canadian Reader

R. C. R. Taunton, of Montreal, writes: "I am not an old reader like some; in fact I was just initiated into reading WEIRD TALES in the January issue. I certainly think they are swell. The more weird the story the better I like it. For my first selection I think *A Rival from the Grave* deserves high honors; Jules de Grandin is a lovable character. Next I choose *Horror Insured*, and as I'm thinking of continuing to read WEIRD TALES, I hope to see more of Ascott Keane and Doctor Satan. Next I think comes *The Satin Mask*, simply because it's creepy. . . . The weird story reprint, *Dagon*, was pretty good, but I like the long stories better, and I don't care much for serials."

Smith, Jirel, Conan, et al.

A. Coffey, of Nehalem, Oregon, writes: "Once more I want to express my appreciation for WEIRD TALES. I have read each issue for years and although they are often hard to get in the northwest logging camps I get my WT some way, often by money order. I do like the stories by C. L. Moore; Northwest Smith and Jirel of Joiry are very interesting characters. And always, the Conan stories by Howard are very entertaining. His short stories about the barbarian are really the best. We all love Jirel of Joiry and admire the mighty Conan, while Northwest Smith takes us into the days of the future."

Drugged or Half Asleep

Joseph Robinsky, Jr., of Elizabeth, New Jersey, writes: "I am amazed, even insulted. How could you thrust such an imbecile thing as *Coils of the Silver Serpent* on the readers of WEIRD TALES? Really, editor, you must have been drugged or half asleep when you let such tripe get into your magazine. It wasn't worth taking the time to read. I have always defended the high standard of WEIRD TALES' stories; I certainly would be embarrassed if my word happened to be tested by a reading of your latest outrage. The title was altogether misleading. It was a typical WEIRD TALES title and I had expected the story to be of the same nature. Instead, I found it to be an inane 'thriller' written in a cheap and slangy style. The expressions, 'Man,' 'Man alive,' etc., were so often repeated that they became trite and tedious, obvious signs of poor writing. The use of a profane phrase, as: 'Drive like hell,' only further cheapens your magazine. What has happened to your immaculate policy? Are you becoming lax or merely trying to compete with the trashy magazines and descend to their level?"

The Dark Land

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "*The Dark Land* by C. L. Moore is utterly different from anything I have ever read. It almost ranks with *Shambleau*, and that's saying a lot. A story would certainly have to be super-excellent to rate on a par with *Shambleau*, for that story is a classic that will probably remain unequaled for an indefinite length of time. *Horror Insured* by Paul Ernst is a Doctor Satan story that is truly weird. If the forthcoming tales of this series are free of unusual scientific devices, as this one is, I will eagerly welcome them."

Pointed Paragraphs

Henry Kuttner, of Beverly Hills, California, writes: "The February issue is excellent, with C. L. Moore, H. P. Lovecraft, and Monet's grand *Norn* stealing the honors. Ernst's yarn, too, was really clever. What's happened to Robert Bloch? Surely he hasn't petered out after such an auspicious start! I also missed Derleth, one of my favorites." [No, neither Bloch nor Derleth has petered out. Both are represented in this issue, and we have some excellent tales by them scheduled for early issues.—THE EDITOR.]

James G. Merriman, of Dyersburg, Tennessee, writes: "The February reprint, *The Temple*, by H. P. Lovecraft, was second only to Robert E. Howard's *The Hour of the Dragon*, in the same issue. I like anything with even the faintest whiff of archeology in it. It sort of gives me a feeling of reverence, lonesomeness, homesickness and awe. My only kick is that the author stopped outside the Temple, and let the German go in and have all the real thrills alone."

Thompson Young, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, writes: "May I ask why in the name of the combined gods of Lord Dunsany, H. P. Lovecraft and James Branch Cabell you printed *Coils of the Silver Serpent* or *The Blue Woman*? I cannot imagine anyone's finding them weird—I'm sorry, but as a devotee of WEIRD TALES such stories give me

a fearful let-down. Of course *Norn* and *Yvala* and *The Temple* were enough to make an unusually fine issue, and *The Hour of the Dragon* is proceeding splendidly."

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "Although *Coils of the Silver Serpent* was an excellent story, it did not belong in WEIRD TALES. It was written well, but I did not find a solitary weird episode in the entire story. The other stories were all good, especially *Yvala* by C. L. Moore."

F. P. O'Connor, of Philadelphia, writes: "In the February issue, Conan was good, as usual. *Yvala* was Moore at his best. *Coils of the Silver Serpent* was purely a detective story with a pseudo-weird atmosphere; it had nice action, though."

Pugh C. Smith, of Los Angeles, writes: "I have been a constant reader of WEIRD TALES for more than ten years, and the magazine continues to intrigue me. Seldom have I read a story in your magazine that did not appeal to me. Even the poetry is so entirely different from that found in most of the other magazines, that it is in a class all to itself."

Valerie L. Schultz, of Chicago, writes: "*Coils of the Silver Serpent,* by Forbes Parkhill, was grand. Give us more of his work. I would also appreciate some more voodoo stories."

Blonds vs. Redheads

Lillian Kaltz, of Philadelphia, writes: "M. Brundage, I have a bone to pick with you—most of your girls are blonds. Why don't you give the redheads a break? In the last two years (I'm a cover collector—so I know) you have done maybe three redheads. I'm tired of seeing pale golden beauties and would like to see some flaming-haired or dark ones for a change. The February installment of *The Hour of the Dragon* is the best I have ever read; and that Conan is truly a superman."

A Superb Issue

T. Torbett, of Marlin, Texas, writes: "I've just read with appreciation the February issue of WT. As far as I am concerned, a story each month by C. L. Moore and Robert E. Howard would constitute a complete issue. Howard's *Hour of the Dragon* is superb and so was Moore's *Yvala.* Moore's *The Dark Land* in the January number I also found to be of excellent literary quality and I liked the author's accompanying illustra-

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tion also. I might also add that I like Seabury Quinn, Clark Ashton Smith, Paul Ernst, Frank Owen and most all authors who contribute to WT."

Hair-raising Stories

M. H. Darter, of Chicago, writes: "WEIRD TALES is my favorite magazine. I especially like hair-raising stories such as *The Hour of the Dragon*, by Robert E. Howard. I think the most truly interesting story of the December issue is *Dancing Feet* by Paul Ernst. *The Hedge*, while not exactly a weird tale to my notion, was certainly very good and quite well written. I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that I enjoy every bit of your magazine."

The February Stories

John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "Having just finished the February issue I wish to make the following comments on it. First of all, the cover was excellent, I liked the violet background very much. Two stories, *Wife of the Dragon-fly* and *Norn*, in my estimation, tied for first place, with *Yvala* closely following. *Coils of the Silver Serpent* was not so good. In the first place there was no weird plot in the story; in the second place, if one did not read *Norn*, *Yvala* and the others, he would think that he was reading an ordinary mystery thriller magazine. In other words, I'm trying to tell you that that story doesn't belong in WEIRD TALES. The short stories were all fine. . . . I am looking forward to more stories about Jules de Grandin. I also look forward to more stories by Edmond Hamilton such as *The Avenger from Atlantis* and *The Six Sleepers*."

A Reader for Twelve Years

Getty B. Cash, of Gaffney, South Carolina, writes: "Have been reading WEIRD TALES for twelve years and take pleasure in saying that I believe that the January issue is the best I have read yet (and that is saying plenty), because every story in it has that weird and interesting nature which makes WT unique and superior to all other magazines. Keep the good work up. My favorite stories are *A Rival from the Grave* by Seabury Quinn, *Horror Insured*, and *The Hour of the Dragon*. The rest are not far behind, and as long as you continue to print stories like these I will continue to read WEIRD TALES. The cover designs are very artistic and beautiful. By all means let M. Brundage continue to give us pictures of beautiful girls, nude or otherwise, on the backs of our magazine."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, let us know which stories you like best in this issue. Write a letter, or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page, and mail it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. Your favorite story in the January issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *Yvala*, C. L. Moore's utterly fantastic and imaginative story of Northwest Smith.

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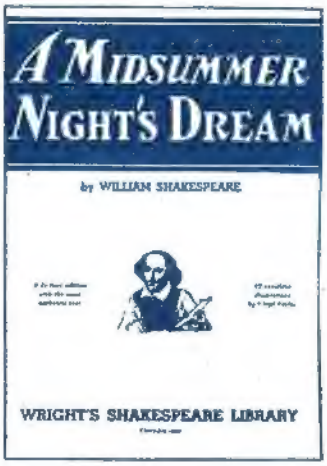

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